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## Language Influence in Services

Perceived importance of native language use in service encounters

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Language Influence in Services: Perceived importance of native language use in service encounters

Key words: Service marketing, service encounters, languages, native language use

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*Jonas Holmqvist*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

One of the defining characteristics of most service encounters is that they are strongly influenced by interactions in which both the consumer and the service personnel are playing integral roles (Bitner 1990; Eiglier and Langeard 1976; Grönroos 1982; Surprenant and Solomon 1987). 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). Given this, it is not surprising that interactions involving communication and customer participation in the service encounters have received considerable attention within the field of services marketing (Grönroos 1978; 1984; Bitner, Faranda, Hubbert, and Zeithaml 1997; 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. Such communication would require a common language, and in order to be able to take this for granted the market would need to be fairly homogenous.

The homogenous country, however, and with it the homogenous market, would appear to be gone. Luna and Peracchio (2001), building on Grossjean (1982) and Hoffman (1991), have put forward the assumption that more than half the consumers in the world might already be speaking more than one language. At least from a non-European perspective, this is hardly anything new. The Americas have been a melting pot for people from all over the world for a long time already. In major US cities such as New York, Los Angeles and Miami, non-Hispanic whites<sup>1</sup> now make up less than 35% of the population. Within Canada, English is now 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, quite a few of the 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. For a company entering a new market, language can be a major barrier that firms may underestimate (Freeman and Sandwell 2008), and understanding language influence across different markets is important for international companies.

The situation in Europe is not much different, as both 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, a fact that has been the case for a long time already. The largest of the groups is the around five million Catalan speakers in Spain, but every European country except Iceland has got linguistic minorities within its borders. EBLUL, the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, estimates that there are around 50 million native speakers of minority languages, a language that is not the largest language in the country, within the European Union. This is something that has always been the case, although a general revival of minority languages has made them more visible. The other factor, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon and consists of the immigration to most European countries. People with an immigrant background make up around eight million in the United Kingdom, slightly over seven million in Germany and close to seven million in France. Counting speakers of minority languages and immigrant languages together, the European Union is now home to more than 100 million people who speak another language than the largest language of the country, and thus the

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<sup>1</sup> Non-Hispanic white is the official US census term for a person of Caucasian origin who is not from a Spanish-speaking background.

market, in which they live. Add to this the fact that markets themselves are becoming less and less dependent on national boundaries, and a global situation emerges in which it can no longer be taken for granted that the consumer and the company speak the same language. In its stead, both marketing practitioners and researchers will have to face and understand services, especially service encounters, in which the language a consumer speaks can have a direct influence both on how the consumer perceives the service encounter and which service provider he / she chooses to frequent.

### **1.1. Research problem**

The service literature has taken a common language between companies and consumers for granted but this is not matched by the realities on the ground in many markets. Good communication is of great importance to the outcome of the service encounter (Grönroos 1978; 1984; Bitner et al. 1997; Zeithaml et al. 1984) but cannot be guaranteed in case the consumer feels that he / she either cannot or does not want to speak the language the service provider is using. Owing to the communicational and interaction-oriented nature of services, the lack of a common language between the consumer and the service provider is a situation that could cause problems (Morales, Cunningham, Brown, and Hays 1999; John-Baptiste, Naglie, Tomlinson, Alibhai, Etmells, Cheung, Kapral, Gold, Abrams, Bacchus, and Krahn 2004).

Language can also influence consumers in service encounters in an emotional way. Apart from the strictly communicative aspect of services, it has been demonstrated that consumer perceptions of fairness in the service encounter influence their evaluation of the whole service (Hui, Zhao, Fan and Au 2004; Smith, Bolton and Wagner 1999). Many people have strong emotional bonds to their language (Holmes 2001), linking it to their own identity (Brala 2007; Pavlenko 2006; Wilson 2005) and being influenced by their cultural identity as consumers (Donthu and Cherian 1994; Hui, Kim and Laroche 1993; Green 1999; Kim and Kang 2001). Not being served in their native language may thus have additional consequences for consumers than merely communicative ones. In situations in which they notice that other consumer groups do get service in their native language, consumers may feel unfairly treated when not receiving the same level of service in their native language as other consumers do in theirs.

Although many kinds of everyday interactions between consumers and companies do not necessarily require much communication in order to be performed with at least some success, the lack of a common language could become a problem the more interactive the context gets. This is especially the case within services, due to the nature of most service encounters. Service encounters involve both consumers and personnel taking an active part (Eiglier and Langeard 1976; Surprenant and Solomon 1987; Bitner 1990; Grönroos 2000). In case the consumer and the company do not share a common language in which both can interact at full ease – even if communication would still be possible to at least some degree – this could have implications for the consumer's perception of the service. Furthermore, in a situation in which a consumer has the option to decide between different service providers, this is something that may influence the decision in case only one of the providers offers the services in the consumer's native language.

A considerable number of studies have been able to demonstrate that language and language skills have the potential to influence consumers in various marketing contexts (Schmitt and Pan 1994; Tavassoli 1999; Luna and Peracchio 2001; Hastie and Park

1986; Schmitt and Zhang 1998), but most of this research has been focused on one-way communication, either on language in mass-communication (Appiah 2001; Grier and Brumbaugh 1999; Lass and Hart 2004; Luna, Lerman and Peracchio 2005) or on the role of language in branding (LeClerc, Schmitt and Dubé 1994; Thakor and Pacheo 1997; Leclerc, Schmitt and Dubé-Rioux 1989; Yorkston and Menon 2004). The role of language in interaction has thus not received the same attention. Some studies within the field of consumer research have focused on differences between cultural groups divided by ethnicity (Hirschman 1981; Mulhern and Williams 1994), showing that consumers' native culture matters when developing trust in companies (Suh, Janda and Seo 2006). It has also been shown that language plays a role in the way that ethnicity influences consumer behaviour (Zmud and Arce 1992), including having a marked influence on consumer acculturation to new markets (Peñaloza 1994; Oswald 1999; Lindridge, Hogg and Shah 2004). A few studies have even focused on how consumers in the same market are divided by language (Chéron and Muller 1993; Laroche, Teng, Michon and Chebat 2005), but without addressing the role of language as anything else than a tool to divide consumers into groups. The research field of services has also been the subject of a few studies on aspects of cultural differences (Donthu and Yoo 1998; Furrer, Liu and Sudharsan 2000; Keillor, Hult and Kandemir 2004; Youngdahl, Kellog, Nie and Bowen 2003) but to a large extent, the possible role that language could play in services has not been touched upon. The exception would seem to be the field of health care, in which attention has been called to the need for using the language of the patients (Brach and Fraser 2002, Fennel 2005). Outside this particular field, however, little attention has been paid to the influence of language on consumers in service encounters.

The question of how consumers behave in service situations presenting them with a possibility to choose between interacting with different companies in different languages has received little attention from a marketing or a service perspective. Building on the situation outlined above, it seems obvious that a gap exists in the service theory. This gap consists of a lack of knowledge concerning how language influences consumers in service encounters. By addressing this gap, the thesis contributes to an increased understanding of service theory and provides a better practical understanding for service companies of the importance of native language use for consumers.

## **1.2. Purpose of the thesis**

The description of the research problem has outlined the existence of a research gap within the service literature, a gap consisting of the lack of research into how native language use may influence consumers in service encounters. In addition, it has been described why this gap is of importance to services and why its importance is growing. Building on this situation, the purpose of the thesis is to establish the existence of language influence in service encounters and to extend the knowledge of how language influences consumers on multilingual markets.

### **1.2.1. Purposes of the essays**

The thesis is made up of four essays, each one contributing towards the main purpose of the thesis. Below, the individual purpose of each essay is outlined, followed by a description of how each essay contributes to the main purpose of the study. While the

first essay outlines the conceptual groundwork, the three empirical essays focus on three different aspects of language use in service encounters.

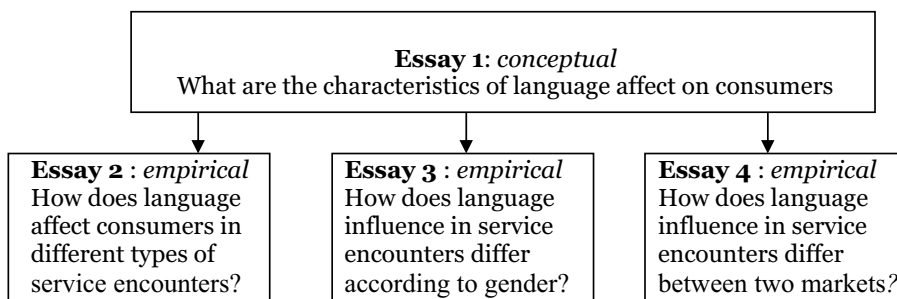
The purpose of the first essay, **Towards Multilingual Marketing : a Theoretical Framework**, is to conceptually describe key sociolinguistic characteristics of both markets and consumers as well as to demonstrate why these characteristics are of importance for marketers. As consumers are also individuals, the essay builds on the assumption that issues influencing individuals' language use are likely to influence their language use also as consumers.

The purpose of the second essay, **When Language Influences Service Encounters**, is to establish to what degree language affects consumers in service encounters and to establish to what extent this influence is dependent upon consumer involvement. The focus on different kinds of service encounters and language influence is derived from the service literature, showing why the importance of language influence could be expected to vary between different service encounters.

The purpose of the third essay, **Language Choices in Services - The Influence of Gender on Language Use in Service Encounters**, is to test how language influence in service encounters differs between females and males. The topic is derived from both the service and the sociolinguistic literature. The former has emphasised the higher involvement of female consumers while the latter has shown considerable differences in language use based on gender.

The purpose of the fourth essay, **Language Influence across Consumer Groups in Services**, is to analyse similarities and differences in language influence within service encounters on two bilingual markets, focusing on two language groups on each market, and to describe difference in the underlying factors influencing consumers' attitudes to native language use in service encounters.

The purposes of the four essays, presented in Figure 1 below, thus combine to answer the main purpose of how language influences consumers on a bilingual or multilingual market. Essay one provides the conceptual framework for how language affects consumers. This influence is studied from three different angles in the other essays to extend the understanding of it from a service point of view. Essay two analyses how language affects consumers in service encounters with varying degrees of consumer involvement. Essay three displays how language influence in service encounters differs between females and males. Essay four analyses to what degree four different language groups on two different markets display similarities and differences in the way language affect them in service encounters.



**Figure 1** Subpurposes of the four essays

### **1.3. Delimitations**

This thesis focuses on service encounters and the role that language can play in the interaction between consumers and companies. The areas of languages in marketing and services in general form a much wider field of study, and while certainly both interesting and worthy of further studies, these areas fall outside the scope of this thesis. This means the exclusion of topics such as language in advertising, language on signs in companies and other situations in which consumers may perceive either the presence or the absence of his / her native language, but in which no communicative and mutual interaction between the consumer and the company occurs. Language can also have a more long-term role in the development of trust between companies and consumers, and while recognising the importance of native language use for such trust, this perspective is not included in the thesis.

The issues of language and national minorities might often include political dimensions. Both of the focus markets used in this thesis, Finland and Canada, have got political movements centred on the national minority. Research carried out on cultural differences between consumers in various markets, including Canada, have noted how the issue may be linked to the political situation on the market (Ouellet 2007). The use of multilingualism can also have a sociolinguistic impact, and some interest groups representing minority languages have called for increased use of minority languages in marketing. It has been the aim of the researcher to keep all such considerations outside the present research and focus solely on how language and language skills can influence the consumers taking part in service encounters. This is not to say that political and sociolinguistic considerations have been ignored – they influence the everyday life of consumers and it would be impossible to completely detach from them. Political and sociolinguistic factors are taken into consideration when they influence consumers, services and markets but the opposite connection is never made; no discussion is carried out on how the use of given languages may influence society. In short, the present thesis builds on earlier research into sociolinguistics as well as services, but it aims to contribute only to the latter field.

To a certain extent, it has to be admitted that such a limitation is almost impossible to make in practice. Already by doing research within the area of languages in marketing, the research might contribute to attracting attention to the topic. The respondents all live in multilingual environments and are likely to hold many different, sometimes conflicting views on the issue of language use. It would be wishful to think that all respondents have ignored their personal opinions about language politics when answering the questions or the questionnaire. Nonetheless, the researcher has not included such topics in the questionnaire and the interviews, nor has he brought them up.

By focusing on two officially bilingual countries, Canada and Finland, and studying the use of the two national languages in each country, the thesis limits itself to official languages, i.e. languages that have a strong constitutional status, a considerable number / proportion of speakers and a stable presence in the country. Although essay one discusses the differences between such markets and markets on which one language dominates, markets on which consumers are used to language switching to the dominant language and markets with immigrant languages, markets of these types were not studied in the thesis.

In its focus on the role of language for consumers, the thesis acknowledges that other factors than language may interfere in the communication between people from

different cultures. Cultural factors such as directness, degree of individuality, differences in perceptions and ways of expressing oneself (Baudry 2007) might also influence the encounter between consumers and companies. Especially in the health-care sector, the importance of hospital personnel not only being able to speak with the patients in their native language but also to culturally understand has been highlighted (Fernandez et al. 2004) While recognising the importance of such cultural influences, this thesis focuses only on the use of language and other aspects of culture than language has thus not been included in the study.

#### 1.4. Definitions

The following terms are frequently used throughout the thesis and are here outlined as they are understood in this context.

**Service encounter** A service encounter is here used to describe an interaction in a service between two parties : the consumer and a service provider (Surprenant and Solomon 1987). While not all aspects of services necessarily require such an interaction, all the service encounters studied in this thesis contains at least some interaction between the consumer and a representative of the service provider.

**Consumer involvement** With involvement, this thesis understands the degree to which the consumer participates in the service encounter. The term originally derived from how cognitively involved the consumer was (Simon 1967, Houston and Rothschild 1978, Bettman 1979). Involvement is thus dependent on how the consumer perceives the situation (Celsi and Olson 1988). In this thesis, the consumer perception of the situation is kept, and combined with consumer participation in service contexts along the lines of Bitner, Faranda, Hubbert and Zeithaml (1997). The thesis distinguishes between service encounters based on low consumer involvement, middle consumer involvement and high consumer involvement.

**Culture** Many marketing studies that have focused on different language groups have used the term cultural groups rather than language groups (Laroche, Kim, Saad and Browne 2000; Schaninger, Bourgeois and Buss 1985). While recognising strong links between the two concepts, this thesis has consistently used the term language groups when differing between groups of people based only on their language, while the term culture is used when discussing differences between consumers along other cultural traits than just language.

**Language** Language can be used with somewhat different meanings; the Oxford dictionary lists six different meanings.

- a. the system of sounds and words used by humans to express their thoughts and feelings
- b. the particular language used by a people or nation
- c. a particular way or style of speaking and writing
- d. the words and phrases used by a particular group or profession

e. signs, symbols, gestures, etc. used for indicating ideas or feelings

f. a system of words, symbols and rules used in writing

Out of these six meanings, a. and b. refer to a spoken language such as English and French. When the term language is used in this thesis, it is used in this sense. Meanings c. and d. refer to a way of speaking, as in formal language, colloquial language or context specific language. This meaning, when discussed in the thesis, is covered by the more precise term 'language variety'. Meanings e. and f. refer to non-oral language, be it written language or body language. As the focus of the thesis is on language use in service encounters in which there is an interaction between the consumer and the service provider, written language is not explicitly discussed in the thesis.

**Native language**

A native language, as it has been used in this thesis, is the first language a person has learnt and is usually also that person's strongest language, although the latter is not always the case. Whether a person can have more than one native language or not is a matter of debate within linguistics (Oblor and Zatorre 2000) but not addressed in this thesis.

**Customer / Consumer**

The thesis consistently employs the term 'consumer', as both the theory and the empirical study focuses on consumers in a general sense rather than on customers of any given company. The term customer is only used in citations from the literature.

## **1.5. Positioning of the thesis**

The thesis draws upon literature from two divergent fields, those of service marketing and of sociolinguistics. Of these two research streams, service marketing is the main focus of the thesis while sociolinguistic theories are used in a supporting role, filling gaps that have remained unaddressed within the service literature. In the following paragraphs, the thesis is positioned against the existing literature within these two main fields of theory.

### **1.5.1. Positioning within service marketing**

This thesis is positioned within the field of service marketing, studying how language and language use are influencing consumers within service encounters. In doing this, the thesis relies in particular on three service traits:

- *Service encounters* (the interaction between the company and the consumer)
- *Consumer involvement* (the extent to which the consumer participate in the service)
- *Culture* (the impact the consumer's culture may have on service perceptions)

Given the study's focus on language use in interactions between companies and consumers, the service encounter is of immediate importance to the thesis. Within the

literature on service encounters, the thesis is positioned close to the view on service encounters as described by Eiglier and Langeard (1974), Grönroos (1982; 1984), Surprenant and Solomon (1987) and Bitner (1990). According to this view, the service encounter is defined as an interaction actively involving both consumer and company. The thesis adopts this view and looks exclusively on such interactions that actively involve both parties.

As the consumer's interaction with the company defines the service encounter, it follows that the degree to which the consumer is engaged in and/or participates in the service encounter will have an impact. The thesis holds that this impact is also to be found within the perceptions of language use in services. Within the field of consumer involvement, the study thus builds upon the division of involvement into high involvement, middle involvement and low involvement. Consumer involvement has long included cognitive aspects (Simon 1967, Houston and Rothschild 1978, Bettman 1979). While recognising this, and acknowledging that the consumer's perception of the situation influences involvement (Celsi and Olson 1988), the thesis does not study cognitive responses to services as such, focusing instead on the participatory aspects of involvement, i.e. the consumer participation in the interaction of the service encounter. In so doing, the thesis positions itself closely to the view on consumer involvement as used by Bitner, Faranda, Hubbert and Zeithaml (1997). According to this view, service contexts can be classified according to the level of consumer participation in the service into low contexts, moderate contexts and high contexts. This view is echoed and supported by the findings of the thesis. In addition, the thesis takes into account findings that the consumers may feel more involved in service encounters that have a direct influence on their person, as outlined by McDougal and Levesque (2000), thus acknowledging that the consumers feel differently about different types of services.

Consumer behaviour theory also recognises the difference between various types of service, but in addition shows that consumers belonging to different cultural groups may perceive the same service in different ways (Laroche et al. 2005, Hui, Joy, Kim, and Laroche 1993; Schaninger et al. 1985). As the cultural groups used in those studies consist of different language groups perceiving services differently, the implications for the current study are immediate. It needs to be mentioned that the notion of culture has at times been given different meanings by different researchers. The definitions of cultural groups in the studies by Laroche, Teng, Michon and Chebat as well as by Schaninger, Bourgeois and Buss equate cultural groups, in this setting, with language groups. This offers a more detailed and partly contrary view to the countrywide definitions of culture as used by Hofstede (1980; Hofstede and Bond 1988). The thesis positions itself closer to Laroche et al. (2005) and Schaninger et al. (1985) in holding that different language groups within the same country make up different cultural groups, rather than accepting the idea of one culture for each country as proposed by Hofstede. In doing so, the thesis accepts that there may be differences in service perceptions between two language groups on the same market, and that these differences may carry across into different perceptions of language use in service encounters within the same country and even within the same city.

### ***1.5.2. Positioning within sociolinguistics***

Within the field of sociolinguistics, the thesis holds that the same factors that have been shown to influence humans as individuals in a society are likely to influence them as consumers as well. Building on the literature from the sociolinguistic field, the thesis



positions itself close to the definitions of bilingualism and diglossia<sup>2</sup> first outlined by Fishman (1967) and acknowledges how these factors are influencing consumer perceptions of the language both as a mean of communication and as an identity marker. According to this view, societies can be divided into four different types based on language use and language attitudes: bilingual societies with diglossia, bilingual societies without diglossia, monolingual societies with diglossia and monolingual societies without diglossia. The view presented in this thesis is that the same divisions as those introduced by Fishman are relevant for markets as well.

Building further on research into how language influences individuals, the thesis positions itself against existing research on gender within both marketing and sociolinguistics. In marketing, the thesis takes into account studies showing that female consumers are more prone to engage cognitively to a larger extent in services (Falk and Campbell 1997; Dholakia 1999). The thesis acknowledges certain similarities between these observed gender differences in marketing and observed differences between genders regarding language use. Within sociolinguistics, the thesis positions itself close to studies finding that there are consistent differences in language use between men and women, with the latter typically using a more prestigious language form (Trudgill 1983). Positioning itself close to these studies, the thesis postulates that as females have been shown to be more conscious of language register and to be more involved in the decision processes as consumers, language is likely to matter more to female than to male consumers.

Apart from the communicative aspects of language, the thesis holds that language also is relevant for identities. In thus arguing that language and language use stretch beyond being only a tool for communication, the thesis is positioned to sociolinguistic research showing that the language a person speaks influences his / her perception of the self (Brala 2007) and that language may serve as an identifying symbol for different communities, something that may extend to business preference (Spolsky & Copper 1991).

## **1.6. Structure of the thesis**

The thesis is structured into two main parts. The first part consists of the introduction, literature review and methodology discussion while the second part focuses on the four essays. Table 1 presents a brief outline of the four essays making up the bulk of the thesis, their main theoretical focus, the research questions and the geographic area in which the empirical data for the essays was collected.

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<sup>2</sup> Diglossia (from Greek : *δι* two *γλωσσία* languages) is a term used to describe situations in which two languages, or two highly divergent forms of the same language, are used for different purposes by the same speakers in a society

**Table 1 Essays in the Thesis**

<b>Essays</b>	<b>Main Focus</b>	<b>Research questions</b>	<b>Area</b>
Essay 1	Sociolinguistics; market conditions	Theoretical concepts. Diglossia, society bilingualism, language identities. Impact on markets and consumers.	Conceptual
Essay 2	Native language use, service encounters	Consumer views on native language use, impact of language skills, differences between services in this regard	Canada
Essay 3	Native language use, gender differences	Differences between female and male consumers in regards to language use in service encounters	Canada and Finland
Essay 4	International comparison of language in service encounters	Description of differences between the markets. Consumer and company responses. Comparison between Finland and Canada analysis.	Canada and Finland

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This thesis focuses on how consumers perceive language use, particularly using their native language, within service encounters. In this chapter, the importance of language in service encounters is explained against the background of earlier research on the nature of service encounters, on how service and consumer's perceptions may be influenced by cultural differences and on perceptions of justice within service encounters and its relevance to language use. This discussion is followed by a review of relevant sociolinguistic literature on how language and language identification have been shown to influence individuals. The essays of the thesis combine these two research streams by showing that key components of how consumers perceive service encounters are related to language and language use.

A reoccurring theme in the thesis and the essays of which it consists is that the way language influences consumers can be roughly divided into two different influences. The first of these is the consumer's *language competence* (cf. Marcella and Davies 2004), focusing on how consumers are influenced by how well they are able to speak other languages than their native language. The second influence is *language identity* (cf. Brala 2007), focusing on how consumers feel about both their native language and other languages.

In the following discussion, native language competence and then language influence are put into perspective within the service encounter, showing how both are relevant for the way consumers view language use when interacting with a service provider. Table 2 presents an overview of these themes.

**Table 2 Overview of the theory section**

<i>Language competence</i>			<i>Language identity</i>		
<i>Service encounters</i>	<i>Communication in service encounters</i>	<i>Consumers' language competence</i>	<i>Languages as identifiers</i>	<i>Perceived justice and the service encounters</i>	<i>Gender and language</i>
How the service encounter depends on interactions requiring language skills	How communication is important for the service encounter and why language influences this	How the service encounter is influenced by the consumer's language competence	How language influences the identity of those who speak it	How perceived justice is of importance to the service encounter	How language use and language attitudes differ between gender

### 2.1. Language competence

Within marketing, it has usually been taken for granted that the company and the consumers share the same language, and researches have largely ignored the role that language plays in communication between business partners who do not share the same native language (Visser 1997; Clarke 2000; Marcella and Davies 2004). Highlighting both the problems this may cause in the communication between company and consumer as well as the lack of research into this situation, Marcella and Davies (2004) argue that language is relevant to each of the four aspects of

communication as introduced by Schramm (1955) and present the following situations in which the lack of a common native language is likely to cause problems:

1. the *communicator's* native *language* complemented by foreign language capability;
2. the *message* encoded in a particular *language*;
3. spoken and written *language* present in the *channels* of communication; and
4. the *receiver's* native *language* and foreign language capability

(Marcella and Davies 2004)

This thesis, with its focus on how consumers are influenced by language, concentrates on the fourth of these points by dealing with the consumer's native language and second language skills within service encounters.

### **2.1.1. Service encounters**

A service encounter, as it is defined in this thesis, is taken to mean the interaction in a service that take place between companies and consumers. This usage builds on the definition given by Suprenant and Solomon, describing service encounters as “the dyadic interaction between a customer and a service provider” (Suprenant and Solomon 1987). This definition thus emphasises the active involvement of both parties in the service encounters. Such encounters have been shown to influence consumer perceptions of the service quality (Grönroos 1984; Bitner 1990; Bitner 1992). It has further been demonstrated that a service encounter that potentially could cause the consumer pain (e.g. dentist visits) or could have a negative impact on the consumer's appearance (e.g. hairdresser) is evaluated in a different way than more neutral service encounters such as a restaurant visit (McDougal and Levesque 2000). This indicates that consumers take the impact that the service encounter could have on them into consideration when evaluating the service. A service encounter that could have a large influence will matter more to the consumer. This displays similarities to the first two criteria for critical incidents, listed by Bitner et al. (1990): an involvement of employee-consumer interaction, and being either very satisfying or dissatisfying from the consumer's point of view. The main difference between these definitions is that in the service encounters outlined by McDougal and Levesque, the consumer will view the interactions as potentially very important/unimportant rather than either satisfying or dissatisfying, although an important interaction that goes wrong is likely to result in dissatisfaction.

In recent years, marketers have paid increasing attention to the importance of the consumer as a co-creator of value during service interactions with the company (Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Vargo and Lusch 2004; Grönroos 2008; Payne, Storbacka and Frow 2008). 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 consumer value is taken to stem (Grönroos 2000; Vargo and Lusch 2004). In order for the customer to be able to participate in co-creating value, it has been suggested that he must have the competence it requires (Vargo and Lusch 2004). If the consumer is not able to interact at full ease, it could be argued that an

important component of this competence is missing. As the successful outcome of consumer-company interactions 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), the role of language, and consumer preferences for native language use, would appear to be crucial for better understanding the value co-creation process.

Within the field of marketing, it has not been researched how service encounters that are perceived to be important from a consumer's point of view are influenced by the fact that the consumers and the company lack a common language in which both are comfortable. However, some studies carried out on patient satisfaction within the field of medical studies resulted in findings that might have implications for the service industry. These studies were carried out within hospitals – a service encounter of perceived importance for many consumers – and could show that Spanish-speaking patients in California perceive a higher quality if their doctor can speak with them in their native language (Jacobs, Chen, Karliner, Agger-Gupta and Mutha 2006; Fernandez, Schillinger, Grumbach, Rosenthal, Stewart, Wang and Pérez-Stable 2004). Thus, there appears to be a language influence in at least some service encounters. When entering into such service encounters in which communication is required for the outcome of the service encounter to be successful, the consumer may prefer being served in his native language, even when able to speak the language of the service provider as a second language.

### ***2.1.2. Communication in service encounters***

The lack of a common native language between the company and the consumer represents a potential marketing communication problem (Marcella and Davies 2004). Given the interactional nature of service encounters, problems in the communication between the company and the consumers are likely to be of special importance in the service encounter. The service encounter involves the interaction, the communication and thus the use of language that takes place between consumers and companies in service encounters. As outlined above, this thesis agrees with the definition of Surprenant and Solomon (1987) in characterising service encounters as dyadic interactions in which both the consumer and the service provider take a proactive role. An emphasis is thus put on the communicative involvement of both parties in the service. Service encounters are characterised by such interactions in which both the consumer and the service personnel are taking an active part (Bitner 1990; Eiglier and Langeard 1976; Grönroos 1982; Surprenant and Solomon 1987), meaning that the need for mutual comprehension could be likely to render services particularly impressionable by differences in culture as well as by communication difficulties caused by not sharing the same native language.

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 in most service encounters. Within the domain of consumers in service encounters, attention has at times been drawn to the communicative dimension of service encounters, meaning ways of communicating in certain contexts (Wägar 2007, building on Säljö 2000). It has further been shown that both the outcome and the quality of the communication directly influence the service encounters (Stiles 1985; Bitner et al. 1990; Mattson and den Haring 1998). One such influence concerning the nature of communication in service encounters is that a supposed contextual setting of the

service encounter provides both the service employee and the consumer with a certain sense of “mastery” over the interaction (Mattson and den Haring). This is another way in which interacting in a service encounter in a second language could influence the quality of the service encounter. The lack of a common native language between the service employee and the consumer may create a problematic situation from a communication perspective (Marcella and Davies 2004), in which this sense of mastering the situation may be lost or diminished.

Apart from the immediate consequences for how the consumers perceive the quality of the service they receive, communication also has the potential to influence consumers’ behaviour. If the consumer experiences that the communication is not satisfactory, this is something that could lead to negative feelings, feelings that in turn could result in the consumer choosing not to continue to engage the service provider (Li, Edwards and Lee 2002; Heinonen and Strandvik 2005). This may be the case even for consumers who are virtually fluent in their second language, as even such fluent bilinguals have been shown to be more at ease in their strongest language (La Heij, Hooglander, Kerling and van der Helden 1996; Luna and Peracchio 2001; Luna and Peracchio 2005). Within the field of services, not much attention has been called to the consequences of the consumers and the company not sharing the same language. What has been shown, in other fields, is 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 (ibid.).

### **2.1.3. Consumers’ language competence**

In a situation where the consumer is interacting with a service provider not using his / her language, the consumer’s language competence will be crucial for the service encounter. In emphasising the consumer’s capacity to speak the language of the service provider, or vice versa, Marcella and Davies (2004) recognise that the degree to which one of the parties in the encounter is able to speak the other’s native language is influencing the communication quality. As this thesis deals with language influence on consumers, it is the consumer’s capacity to speak another language that is relevant.

As the consumer’s capacity to speak the service provider’s language is likely to influence the service encounter, it is thus relevant to address the consumer’s second language skills. A person with the capacity to interact in a service encounter in a second language is here described as a bilingual consumer. The concept of bilingualism has been defined in different ways, with as many as 27 existing definitions (Wei 2000), ranging from only persons brought up with native competence in both languages to all persons with at least a basic knowledge of a second language (cf. Baetens Beardsmore 1982; Baker and Prys Jones 1998; Wei 2000). The question about who is really bilingual has thus been answered by many definitions at different times. In order to narrow the concept down within the scope of this thesis, the concept of bilingualism has here been defined as a combination of different components, including the degree to which a person is

capable to use his / her native language (L1) as well as his / her second language (L2), or the contexts in which he / she uses the languages (Mackey 1962).

The questions of to what degree an individual can be equally competent in more than one language, and to what degree second language learners acquire new languages, are both matters of much debate within the field of psycholinguistics (Oblor and Zatorre 2000), and this thesis does not enter into that debate. The definition of a bilingual consumer as used in this thesis corresponds to the definition given by Wei (2000) as a *functional bilingual* [someone who can operate in two languages with or without full fluency for the task at hand]. These bilinguals are further divided into two subgroups by Wei, the highest of these being a *maximal bilingual* [someone with near native control of two or more languages] as covering persons within the highest reaches of bilingualism (ibid. pp. 6-7). A somewhat lower level of bilingualism is defined as a *dominant bilingual* [someone with greater proficiency in one of his or her languages and who uses it significantly more than the other language(s)] (ibid. pp. 6-7). It is these definitions of an individual's language competence that are used here to correspond to the description of consumers' language capacity (Marcella and Davies 2004). While a maximal bilingual might usually be expected to be equally at ease with both languages when interacting in a service encounter, this may not be the case for dominant bilinguals who may not know topic-specific vocabulary in their second language. The consumer's language capacity will thus influence how well he / she can communicate with the service provider (ibid.), potentially resulting in problems in communication.

## **2.2. Language identity**

The discussion so far has argued for the importance of communication in service encounters, and has pointed out the crucial role of language, as a large part of communication is expressed explicitly by language use. However, the role of languages is more extensive than merely as a mean of communication. Languages and language use also have the potential of communicating identities and loyalties in themselves (Spolsky and Cooper 1991) and it has been pointed out that language is strongly linked to nationalist feelings that influence the consumer's perceptions (Redondo-Bellón 1998; Dunn 1976). Feelings regarding the own language and/or a foreign language have been shown to 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 their capacity to use another language.

### **2.2.1. Languages as identifiers**

Language is influencing how *well* consumers can communicate with service providers (Marcella and Davies 2004) but language can also influence how *willing* consumers are to communicate in another language than their native language (Fernandez et al. 2004). Looking at languages from a service perspective, both of these roles are important. When taking part in a service encounter, consumers do not only evaluate the quality of the service they receive, but also the language in which they receive it (Fernandez et al. 2004; John-Baptiste, Naglie, Tomlinson, Alibhai, Etchells, Cheung, Kapral, Gold, Abrams, Bacchus and Krahn 2004). Even though consumers may be functionally fluent in another language than their own, they may still prefer to use their native language, sometimes strongly so, for other reasons than just ease of communication.

Communication may be carried out by means such as using signs, body language or facial expressions, but for most communication in both written and spoken form, language is a crucial part. Despite being a necessary tool for communication and interactions, however, language often extends beyond these rather neutral functions into potentially more emotional areas. That a tense political situation may translate into a tense situation between languages has been illustrated by looking at the sociolinguistic environment of Jerusalem's old town (Spolsky and Cooper 1991). In discussing the use of signs in the old town, Spolsky and Cooper found that the language(s) a company chooses to use is interpreted as communication not only regarding the explicit content of the sign, but implicitly also the loyalties of the companies. Given the tense situation in the city, the perceived loyalties of companies are having a huge influence on which consumers they attract (*ibid.*).

Most language situations are not as tense as in the previous example, but language seems to interact with a sense of identity in all kinds of markets. Approaching the question of language and identity with the aim of finding out whether individuals who master more than one language feel different when using another language than their own, native Croatian-speaking university students in the Croatian city of Rijeka and in the Italian city of Trieste were asked, "Do you feel like a different person sometimes when you use your different languages?" (Brala 2007). The research question built on earlier research (Pavlenko 2006; Wilson 2005) finding that close to half of all respondents (47.7%) always feel different when using another language than their own, and that 69.3% feel different at least some of the time. In addition to this, Brala set out to find whether Croatian speakers in Croatia (making up a huge national majority within the country) responded differently from Croatian speakers in Italy (making up a very small minority and most of whom were fully bilingual in Italian). The results indicated that language had a slightly higher influence on the perceptions of identity among Croatian speakers in Italy, but the results of both groups were very close to each other. More than 70% of the respondents reported that they felt different depending on what language they spoke (Brala 2007). The connection between language and identity was thus seen to be strong, and to be relevant both for a strong majority and for a small minority.

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. In addition, 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 (*cf.* Fernandez et al. 2004). Consumers in at least some countries have also been shown to have a preference for cultural services involving language originating in another culture but being in their own language, as in the case of Francophone Canadian and Swiss consumers displaying preferences for cultural offerings from France (d'Astous, Giraud Voss, Colbert, Carù, Caldwell and Courvoisier 2008), demonstrating the potential of language as a common identifier for its speakers.

### ***2.2.2. Perceived justice and the service encounter***

As language is a part of the individual's identity (Brala 2007; Pavlenko 2006; Wilson 2005), this may have implications for how the consumer feels about not being able to use his / her native language, adding an emotional aspect to how language can influence consumers.



Within the setting of the service encounter, consumers' emotions might thus play a part. While it has been suggested that consumers do not typically feel emotional about the service encounter itself (Price, Arnould and Deibler 1995), negative feelings such as irritation and disappointment, but also positive feelings like surprise, have been shown to influence consumers in service encounters, suggesting that emotions might indeed play a role in service encounters (van Dolen, Lemmink, Mattsson and Rhoen 2001; Grace 2007; Mattila and Enz 2002). One of the emotions studied within the field of services is the concept of fairness, the role of which has been emphasised within the service encounter (Hui, Zhao, Fan and Au 2004; Smith, Bolton and Wagner 1999). Linking emotions in service encounters to the question of fairness theory, it has been recognised that a negative perception of fairness, a situation in which the consumer feels wrongly treated, has a negative impact on the consumer and might lead to feelings of anger and frustration (McCull-Kennedy and Sparks 2003). Regarding perceptions of justice in service encounters, particularly in complaints handling, a model consisting of three kinds of justice has been put forward by Tax, Brown and Chandrashekar (1998). The model divides justice into distributive justice (focus on the outcome), procedural justice (focus on the process) and interactional justice (focus on the interaction) (ibid.). Regarding the impact of the three types of justice, it has been suggested that distributive justice contributes strongly to satisfaction with the service while interactional justice also contributes, but not as strongly and the results for procedural justice are highly heterogeneous (Sabadie, Prim-Allaz and Llosa 2006). Thus, it is the outcome that would seem to matter most in the service encounter. Building further on the concept of fairness and the emotions it may cause in the service encounter, a situation in which a consumer perceives that other consumers receive better treatment, this is something that is likely to cause consumer dissatisfaction (cf. Van den Bos, Lind, Vermunt and Wilke 1997). Within a service encounter, it has not been tested how consumers are influenced by situations in which other consumers may be served in their native language while they themselves are not and whether this is something that they may view as unfair treatment.

### **2.2.3. Gender and language in services**

When looking at how language identity influences the consumer, it is relevant to note the role played by gender. Introducing gender into a study on language in services builds both on earlier research on gender and ethnicity in services (Koku 2005; Mattila 2000) and especially on very consistent findings regarding gender and language during a long time within the field of sociolinguistics. Looking at differences between females and males in terms of both language use and language identity, a large number of studies have resulted in a nowadays well-known difference in this regard between the two genders (Labov 1966; Gal 1978; Trudgill 1983; Kerswill 2003). The number of studies on this subject and the consistency in the results have led to the differences between gender in terms of language being called the most consistent finding within the fields of sociolinguistic studies during the past 20 years (Trudgill 1983). Among the differences found in various studies on language and gender, women have consistently been characterised by factors usually associated with urban, more modern and more prestigious levels of the language; in short, women are usually closer to the standard language and quicker to adapt new language trends. In contrast to this, males have been characterised by using language levels that are more closely connected with rural areas and / or a lower education. Men are thus more likely to hold on to dialects or minority languages and slower than women to adopt new trends in language (Bittner 1994, Kerswill 2003, Trudgill 1983). Although a large number of studies have resulted in the same results, it has been emphasised that they are only applicable on a general

level (Trudgill 1983). On this general level, however, the overall pattern of females and males differing from each other in terms of language use and language attitudes is very strong.

Given the high degree to which the above-mentioned differences between females and males have been proven in numerous sociolinguistic studies, it is hardly surprising that similar results have been found within consumer behaviour. In these studies as well, some general differences have been observable between females and males. One difference concerns consumers' decision making; something that has been studied especially within a shopping setting. The results show that the average female consumer spends more time thinking about the decision making in shopping and that she is engaged in the process to a larger degree, both mentally and by being more involved, than the average male consumer (Falk and Campbell 1997; Dholakia 1999) and that she tends to be more perceptive to pro-social values in cultural services (Voss and Cova 2006).

The way male and female consumers react also depends on their company; females have been shown to react in the same way to advertising containing emotions while males react differently if another male is present (Fisher and Dubé 2005). A recent study focusing explicitly on the influence of gender within service encounters, more specifically in the banking industry, has shown that gender is an issue also in service encounters (Forseth 2005). While not focusing on the decision making addressed in other studies, the study found that both the service personnel and the consumers may perceive the service encounter somewhat differently depending on gender, with females being more attentive than males (*ibid.*). Echoing the results of women being more involved in the service process than men, a gender difference has also been observed within service failures; once again it is the female consumers who feel it to be more important to be heard during the service recovery process, thus further enforcing the pattern of a generally higher involvement among female consumers (McColl-Kennedy, Daus and Sparks 2003). All in all, the studies show a general tendency for female consumers to be more involved in the service process than their male counterparts.

It can thus be seen that a gender difference exists both with regards to language and with regards to consumer behaviour and that differences within both fields are well documented in the consumer behaviour as well as in the sociolinguistic literature. In both fields, the general tendency is for females to pay more attention, both to the way they speak and the way in which they behave as consumers. However, the topic of how gender may influence perceptions of language use within services has not previously been touched upon, although the above mentioned finding would combine to make a gender influence on service communication and the languages used in the services likely.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

The study for the thesis is mainly quantitative in nature, utilising data gathered from a questionnaire distributed in Canada and in Finland. Notwithstanding this emphasis on the quantitative data, the thesis also includes qualitative parts in the form of a pre-study as well as interviews with some of the participants in the quantitative main study. In the following chapter, the researcher's view on science is briefly outlined to provide a backdrop to the study. This is followed by a presentation of the data collection process, including a description of the different studies and of the markets on which the data has been gathered.

#### **3.1. Epistemology and ontology**

Every researcher has his / her own view of reality and it will influence the choices he / she makes when conducting research. It is thus the task of any researcher to account for his / her own view. The epistemology of the thesis is positioned to include both positivistic and anti-positivistic elements, but leaning towards the positivist side. Within the field of consumer research, it has historically been more common to accept an epistemological viewpoint close to positivism (Tadajewski 2006), emphasising the actual, observable facts about the physical world. This view is to be contrasted with the anti-positivistic view that instead holds that the human social world is not comparable to the natural world, and that positivism is missing out on cultural aspects such as norms and values. The research for this thesis includes anti-positivistic elements; it recognises that different cultural contexts, cultural norms and individual differences will affect any respondent and that these factors may often be beyond what the researcher can observe. However, it also holds that the main elements being studied in the thesis, respondents' perceived importance of language in various given service encounters, are observable and measurable, thus adopting a view close to positivism in this regard.

Regarding the ontology in the thesis, in which nominalism and realism could be said to constitute two opposing poles, the research in this thesis is positioned close to realism. On the scale between the nominalist view of facts not existing outside our mind and the realist view that things exist independently, the researcher fully subscribes to the latter view. Thus, the researcher firmly believes that all the entities and the different phenomena that have been studied and described in the thesis are real and that they exist independently of both the study and the researcher. In particular, the thesis adheres closely to scientific realism as described below.

#### **3.2. Scientific realism**

My view on science, as stated above, is closest to the philosophy of scientific realism. Scientific realism holds that the world, and thus the reality, exists independently of the researcher and independently of outside perceptions (Hunt 1990; Ackroyd and Fleetwood 2000). The roots of realism are to be found in the platonic realism, a paradigm accepted in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the English philosophers Bertrand Russell and George Edward Moore.

A core view of scientific realism is that the results found by scientific research constitute knowledge of theory-independent phenomena. Because of this, knowledge is

possible even in situations where the phenomena are not observable. Scientific realism is a research paradigm based on the perception that social phenomena exist in the objective world and not only in the mind (Bhaskar 1989; Miles and Huberman 1994).

According to scientific realists, the claims of a well-defined theory can usually be believed. This holds true provided that we can trust the scientists who came up with the theory or contributed the findings presented in it. Our interpretations of knowledge are virtually always influenced by the theories to which we adhere (Sayes 1992; Miles and Huberman 1994), but whatever our conceptions of the topic of the theory are, we should be able to trust that the phenomena studied have the properties the theory claims them to have. Since almost all scientific knowledge will by its very nature be rather approximate, it makes sense according to scientific realism to accept the findings of scientists who are able to convincingly prove their theories. In other words, it comes down to the evidence with which the theory presents us – if the evidences are reliable and verifiable, scientific realists will believe the description of the phenomena (cf. Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy). Four main characteristics of scientific realism are outlined in Table 3, building on Hunt (1990).

**Table 3 Four characteristics of realism**

<b>Classical realism</b>	The world (reality) exists independently of perceptions
<b>Fallibilistic realism</b>	Science should develop knowledge about the world, even though that knowledge cannot be known for sure
<b>Critical realism</b>	Claims of knowledge must be critically tested and evaluated in order to test the extent to which they represent the world
<b>Inductive realism</b>	The success of a scientific theory over time gives reason to believe that the realities described in the theory exists.

Based on Hunt (1990)

In general, realism is a fairly common philosophy of science within the research stream of marketing, and well suited to the discipline (Easton 2001). Scientific realism is deemed to be well suited also for the present research carried out in this thesis. The following paragraph positions my own view of my research within the concepts introduced in the previous paragraphs, and takes into account the four characteristics of realism as presented in Table 3.

I strongly believe that language influence on consumers, my research topic, exists since it is observable and has been described by other researchers, although not from an entirely identical perspective. My own view of research matches that of scientific realism. I fully subscribe to the view that we cannot acquire definite, absolute knowledge about reality but that the role of science is to try to describe reality as correctly as possible. My aim in this research is not to establish any absolute truth but to try to describe as closely as possible the nature of language influence on consumers in services, and the implications this may carry. The findings of the study as well as the

research methods employed to reach these findings have been subjected to testing to see whether they hold true. As with any study and the theories outlined herein, its success over time will be judged by its reliability over time.

It is clear to the researcher that the social phenomena studied with regards to both languages and service encounters depend on the context of the study. Finally, the researcher acknowledges that the circumstances in which the knowledge of the study was gathered and interpreted will affect the knowledge. Both markets studied in the present thesis are situated in countries that rank among the world's top countries in GDP per capita - Canada 14<sup>th</sup> and Finland 12<sup>th</sup> (IMF World Economic Outlook 2007), as well as in the human development index, Canada 4<sup>th</sup> and Finland 11<sup>th</sup> (Human Development Report Office 2007). Not only might there be differences between the sociolinguistic situation in different societies, but the whole society and its view on services itself may be different. The nine service encounters used as examples in this thesis appeared to be accepted as perfectly natural by respondents in both Canada and Finland, and were in fact based on services mentioned by respondents in the latter market during a pre-study. It is not only possible but also even probable that a similar pre-study to select services would have resulted in a different set of services in multilingual countries such as Indonesia, Kenya or Bolivia. The set of services used in this study would appear to be well suited at least for developed Western countries but may not necessarily be so for all other countries, highlighting the context-dependent nature of research.

### **3.3. Emic and etic**

In a cross-cultural study, the role of the researcher may be influenced by whether his connection with, and pre-understanding of, the cultures involved in his research differ from each other. For a researcher conducting research both in his home-country and in a foreign country, the notion of bias must always be taken into account, going back to the idea of emic (seeing the topic as an insider) and etic (seeing the topic as an outsider) as first conceptualised by Pike (1967).

In Montréal and Canada in the study for this thesis, the researcher was an outsider. In a study such as the present study, this alienhood may carry both advantages and disadvantages. A disadvantage for any researcher comparing a situation in his own country with that in a foreign country will always be that he / she can never obtain as extensive an understanding of the society as of his / her own society. Before starting the study in Montréal, the researcher addressed this imbalance by reading extensively not only earlier research on cultural differences on the market, but also books about the society, politics, culture, history etc. This, in addition to continuously following the news and reading the newspapers helped the researcher reach a broader and more in-depth knowledge of both the society and the market, but it can still not be compared to how well a person knows his own society.

On the other hand, being a foreigner in a society may also be an advantage for the researcher in certain aspects. In Canada and within Québec in particular, the language question has at times been very sensitive, as has the question of whether Québec should separate from Canada. A referendum on this issue resulted in Québec staying in Canada by a margin of less than one per cent in 1995, showing the polarising effect that language may carry with it. Both language and the independence movement continue to be a decisive factor in the country, and especially in the province of Québec, as can be seen both by its defining role in politics and its prominence in the media of the

province. In this situation, it may be beneficial for a researcher investigating potential differences between the country's Anglophones and Francophones not to belong to any of these two groups. This is especially the case as the questionnaire for this research in a sense put the option of using English or using French against each other in service encounters. It is the researcher's belief that both groups in Montréal perceived him more or less in the same way. His name is neither English nor French and he speaks both of these languages roughly equally well. The researcher took care to always speak French with the Francophone respondents, explained his research in French to the respondents and conducted the interviews with Francophones in French. Similarly, he spoke English with Anglophone respondents and interviewees in all situations.

In Jakobstad and Finland, the advantages and disadvantages are largely the opposite to those in Montréal and Canada. Having grown up in Jakobstad, the researcher knows the situation in both the city and the country very well. While this is an advantage, it could also become disadvantageous. If the researcher takes his own point of view for granted and assumes that his own knowledge of the market is enough for him to understand it without analysing it in the same way as he would with a foreign market, the result may not represent the real situation on the ground. In the present study, the researcher has tried to avoid this by strictly applying the methodology conceived for the study in Canada. The fact that the study was quantitative may have been beneficial in this regard, as it allowed the researcher to take a rather restricted role. A disadvantage that it was impossible to avoid was that of the researcher not occupying the same position of neutrality as in Montréal. Although the researcher followed the same principle as in Montréal of always addressing the students in the same language as the teacher of the class spoke to them, the researcher's name clearly marks him as belonging to one of the two groups on the market. For this reason, the researcher consciously took a somewhat more restrictive role when distributing the questionnaire in Finland than in Canada, letting the Finnish lecturers do a somewhat larger part of the presentation of the questionnaire.

### **3.4. Data collection**

The initial stages of the study for the thesis were abductive in scope, abductive research being a process in which data is collected at the same time as the theory is built (Dubois and Gadde 2002). The abductive research approach was needed in order to be able to comprehend the situations in which language matters or does not matter to consumers, why this may be the case and in order to formulate hypotheses in a field that has seen little previous research. The pre-study conducted for the thesis was thus abductive in nature. The following stages of the study, including the quantitative main study, were largely deductive in scope, focusing on testing the hypotheses derived from both the pre-study and the literature. All the three essays in the thesis including empirical data, essays two, three and four, build mainly on these quantitative and deductive research stages. Essay four, however, also features the results of qualitative interviews with respondents; these interviews were also abductive and focused on going one step beyond the results of the quantitative data in order to explore the underlying reasons behind the results of the main study. An overview of the studies is presented in Table 4.

**Table 4 Characteristics of the studies**

	<b>Approach</b>	<b>Logic</b>	<b>Markets</b>	<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Researcher</b>
Pre-study	Qualitative	Abductive	Finland	12	Interviews	Emic
Main-study	Mainly quantitative	Deductive	Canada & Finland	373	Questionnaire	Emic & etic

The researcher is of the opinion that both qualitative and quantitative methods possess many merits and has striven to build on the strengths of both in the data collection for the thesis. Qualitative methods are well applicable to preliminary research in areas where little previous research is available, and also well suited to in-depth research on underlying reasons behind consumer choices. Quantitative methods, in turn, are well suited to test hypotheses, to compare groups and means and to reach a more generalisable picture. In this thesis, both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used, and the reason for each is explained in more detail in the paragraphs outlining the pre-study and the main study for this thesis.

The data collection for the thesis consisted of three parts. These parts were

- A **pre-study** with consumers in Finland to solicit information about service encounters in which language was seen as important or unimportant.
- The **main study** in both Canada and Finland in which a questionnaire based on the pre-study was used to identify language influence in nine service encounters.
- A **control study** with consumers in Finland using the same questionnaire as in the main study but without the language component.

In the following sections, the three studies are described from the perspective of the methodology and the sample of the studies. The presentation of the study is followed by a discussion on the use of undergraduate students as respondents. The last paragraph of sections 3.4.2 deals with the role of the researcher and the implications this may have for the research, especially as the researcher in this case was an outsider on the Canadian market and an insider on the Finnish market.

### **3.4.1. Studies**

A pre-study was conducted with consumers in a bilingual market, Finland, with the purpose of identifying service encounters that were seen as either very important or not important in terms of native language use. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for the pre-study in order to find out not only in which contexts a language was used, but also the reasons offered by the respondents for making their choices. In order to achieve as reliable results as possible, the ten respondents were asked to describe real service situations that they had encountered. The intention was thus to focus on actual examples provided by the respondents as contexts in which they were already using either their first or their second language. This was deemed more reliable than hypothetical situations, and the answers regarding the language influence on the

consumers in different service encounters were thus typical contexts in which consumers had experienced language difficulties. In order to avoid regional bias or bias from just one type of society, the respondents came from different parts of Finland and from areas where their native language dominated, areas where their native language was on an equal footing as well as areas where their native language was spoken by a small minority. The respondents were all native speakers of Swedish but with a considerable variance in their self-reported skills in Finnish, ranging from full bilinguals raised with both languages to respondents reporting being considerably less at ease when speaking Finnish and not using it actively in everyday life. The respondents were between 20 and 30 years at the time of the interviews and were selected to ensure an even division between females and males and to represent different educational backgrounds as well as the different regional backgrounds mentioned above.

The main study of the thesis consisted of a questionnaire, described below. The interviews in the pre-study had indicated that consumers might view language differently depending on the service encounter, even up to the point of being prepared to pay a price-premium for using their first language. For this reason, a quantitative approach was employed in the main study in order to be able to test statistically the extent of this presumed language-preference as well as be able to observe statistical differences between various subgroups as well as between different service encounters.

#### *Design and measures*

Based on the results of the pre-study, a questionnaire was assembled to test the importance of speaking one's native language in different service encounters. For the questionnaire, it was decided to use scenarios involving match choice, in order to present the respondents with realistic situations that would need a minimum of explanations. In each scenario, a service encounter was described to the consumer who could choose from a service provider using his first language or a service provider using the other main language of the market. The price for the service in the consumer's native language was given, and he / she was then asked to give the price at which he / she would consider the service in the second language to be of better value to him / her. The reason for choosing to ask for price as a measure of preference builds on the findings by Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1996). According to their study, consumers within a service setting may express their preference for a service provider by being willing to pay a higher price to be served by a company for which they have a preference (ibid.).

The second part of the questionnaire consisted of Likert-scales from 1-9, asking the consumers to rate the perceived importance of using their native language in the nine types of service encounters found in the questionnaire and, finally, to rate their knowledge of the two main languages of the market (French & English and Finnish & Swedish respectively).

The result of the qualitative pre-study had suggested that many of the respondents in Finland knew or assumed that they paid a higher price to their current bank or insurance company than they could get from a competitor, but were prepared to pay the higher price in order to receive the service in their native language. When the questionnaire was first pre-tested in Montréal, it reflected these results by asking respondents how much higher a price they would be prepared to pay to a fictional company that served them in their first language as compared to one that did not. The



pre-test quickly revealed that this phrasing was received badly, as some felt it suggested that they would have to pay more to get the same service as others. The phrasing was thus reversed to instead ask how much lower price a competitor not using their native language would have to offer for them to take that offer over a company that did serve them in their native language. It turned out that this phrasing did not meet any negative response, neither in the pre-test nor in the actual data collected. When the study was repeated in Finland, the same phrase was retained in order to obtain as comparable data as possible.

A first version of the questionnaire, consisting of twelve scenarios, was deemed as requiring too much time for the study, and the questionnaire was scaled down to nine scenarios. Seven of the nine scenarios were based on encounters explicitly mentioned in the pre-study as being either very important or not important at all: banking, insurance, medical visit, electric installations, hairdresser, (all of them important) as well as buying food and going to a café (not important). Reviewing these scenarios, it seemed that the scenarios requiring more involvement were also more expensive. In order to be able to distinguish the influence of price from the influence of involvement, two scenarios were added: buying an expensive etching and buying a holiday on-line; the former consisting of a simple transaction just like buying food or a coffee, but at a much higher price. The latter scenario involved a situation in which no oral communication was needed, just a passive knowledge of the language. The questionnaire contained space after each scenario for the respondents to elaborate on their answers in written form. It turned out that the vast majority of the respondents in all language groups took this opportunity to argue for why they answered as they did. The study thus yielded a considerable amount of qualitative data to accompany the quantitative responses of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was pre-tested both in Finland and in Québec, and adjusted accordingly. The questionnaire was further translated into each of the four languages, so that the translator always translated into his own native language. Back translation was used to ensure the questionnaire being correct, and Francophone and Anglophone Quebecers read through the final version to detect possible cultural factors that could have biased the results.

### *Markets*

In order for the questionnaire to be relevant, it was deemed important that large populations in both cities should speak the two main languages on each market. Although the study could be conducted among a minority population almost no matter how small its size, a person belonging to a very large majority both in the country and in the city was assumed not to find the questionnaire relevant. A native English speaker in Calgary or a native Finnish speaker in Helsinki would probably not find it meaningful to be asked how they would perceive not being served in their respective native language, as the situation would be unlikely to arise. It was estimated that a city in which both language groups are large and where the national minority makes up the regional majority would be best suited for the study, as this would present a situation in which neither group could be definitely categorised as a majority used to always being able to speak its own language.

In addition, practical limitations and time restraint in Montréal meant that an undergraduate sample had to be used, the advantages and disadvantages of which are

discussed in detail in section 3.4.2. In order to obtain comparable data in Finland, it was thus deemed necessary to conduct the study in a city with undergraduates.

In Canada, Montréal was selected as the best market for the study. The city has both a large French speaking population, 2.275.035 individuals in the Montréal Census Metropolitan area, and a large English speaking population, 408.185 individuals in the same area. (Canadian Census 2001). The city is by far the largest Canadian city with a Francophone majority. Within Canada, native French-speakers make up a provincial majority of 81% in Québec and a national minority of 23% while native English speakers make up a national majority of 59% and a provincial minority of 8%. There is thus a situation in which both communities can be viewed, and often view themselves, both as a majority and a minority. Bilingualism in Montréal is relatively widespread with over 50% of the population being able to speak both official languages (*ibid.*).

In the corresponding study in Finland, Jakobstad was selected as the most suitable city. With a population of 41.621, it is home to 30.924 Swedish speakers making up a regional majority of 74,3% and 9.947 Finnish speakers making up a regional minority of 23,9%. On a national level, the Finnish speakers are the majority 92%, Swedish speakers making up a national minority of 5,5%. Although much smaller than Montréal, Jakobstad is the largest city in Finland with a Swedish speaking majority. Jakobstad is also one of the few majority Swedish speaking cities in Finland with both Swedish and Finnish undergraduate programs.

The selection of Montréal in Canada and Jakobstad in Finland thus meant that the questionnaire was distributed in the largest city of each country in which the national minority makes up a regional majority. Regarding this thesis's application of Fishbein's four kinds of societies (*cf.* Fishbein 1967), both Montréal and Jakobstad would classify as typical examples of markets with bilingualism without diglossia. In both cities, speakers of either of the two national languages tend to use them in all kinds of situations. The research for this thesis is thus dealing with four different language communities in two markets, some key characteristics of which are presented in Table 5.

The difference in population between the cities is large enough to warrant a comment. Whereas Montréal is a city with over three million people in Greater Montréal, Jakobstad is a city with around 20 000 people in the city itself and a further 21 000 in its immediate hinterland. This difference is explained by factors such as Canada having a considerably larger population than Finland, and the French-Canadians making up a much higher percentage in Canada than do the Finland-Swedes in Finland. The French-Canadians are largely confined to one single province, as more than 85% of all French-Canadians live in Québec, and in this province French-speakers make up around 80% of the population. In contrast, although Finland-Swedes are also concentrated to certain regions in Finland, they are more dispersed and in the region with the highest number of Finland Swedes, Uusimaa, they make up less than 10% of the population while the only region with a strong Swedish majority, the Åland Islands, is home to less than 10% of the Finland Swedes.

**Table 5 Markets in the study**

	<b>Canada</b>	<b>Finland</b>	<b>Montréal<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>Jakobstad<sup>4</sup></b>
Population	33,237,000	5,306,601	3,635,571	41,621
<b>English / Finnish</b>	59,3%	91,5%	18,5%	23,9%
<b>French / Swedish</b>	23,2%	5,5%	70,5%	74,3%
<b>GDP/Capita</b>	\$38,200	\$40,197		
<b>HDI</b>	0.961	0.952		

*The row English / Finnish gives the proportion of the national majority language in Canada and Finland respectively, while the row French / Swedish gives the same data for the national minority language.*

Before the research was carried out, the large difference in size between the cities was considered in order to estimate whether it would create an imbalance in the results. In the end, it was assumed that that would not be the case. All the service encounters included in the questionnaire are services that can easily be found in both cities, thus ensuring that the nine different service situations included in the questionnaire would be relevant in each city.

### *Sample*

In Montréal, the questionnaire was distributed to undergraduate students at an Anglophone and at a Francophone university. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed, resulting in 248 returned and usable questionnaires, representing a return rate of 82.7%. The questionnaire was bilingual with English on one side and French on the other, and the respondents were asked to fill it in according to their native language. Of the 248 respondents, 108 reported French as their native language and 86 reported English. The somewhat higher number of Francophone respondents is due to more Francophones studying in Anglophone universities than vice-versa. 54 respondents reported being Allophones, native speakers of another language than the two official languages of Canada; a total of 22 such languages were reported and the allophone respondents were roughly equally divided between using English or French as their second language. In Jakobstad, 136 questionnaires were distributed and 125 returned and usable questionnaires gave a return ratio of 91.9%. When looking at the sample, the differences between Montréal and Jakobstad need to be taken into consideration. While Montréal is home to more than 200.000 students, there are only around 200 in Jakobstad. This means that the sample in Montréal was much larger than the one in Jakobstad, but that the sample in Jakobstad represented around two thirds of all students in the city. In both cities, the average age was approximately the same in all four groups and all four groups showed a higher proportion of females than the national average.

<sup>3</sup> The figures are for the Montréal Metropolitan Area.

<sup>4</sup> The figures include the smaller neighbouring municipalities of Larsmo, Pedersöre and Nykarleby for which region Jakobstad is the centre.

The questionnaire contained space after each scenario for the respondents to elaborate on their answers in written form. It turned out that the vast majority of the respondents in all language groups took this opportunity to argue for why they answered as they did. The study thus yielded a considerable amount of qualitative data to accompany the quantitative responses of the questionnaire. This qualitative data has been used in this thesis to go deeper into some possible differences behind the quantitative data gathered on the two markets.

After the main study had been conducted, a control study was carried out. The aim of the control study was to check the responses in the main study regarding the importance of speaking one's native language in these services. There was a risk that respondents would just answer which services they thought were the most important in general rather than taking the language aspect into consideration. In order to be able to rule this out, the control study consisted of the same questionnaire in which respondents were asked to rank services on a scale from 1 to 9, but language was not mentioned at all in the control study. The respondents in the control study thus ranked only the importance of the services, and it was expected that their answers would turn out to be different from those in the four language groups. This would allow it to be established that there is indeed a genuine language influence in the answers of the main study. The control study was distributed to a sample of 28 Swedish-speaking respondents corresponding to the respondents in the main study.

### ***3.4.2. Using undergraduates as respondents***

As outlined above, the sample used for the main study for essay two, essay three and essay four consisted of undergraduate students. Using undergraduate students as respondents was a convenience sample, providing easy access to respondents.

Attention has been drawn to some risks of using undergraduate students, highlighting the tendency for answers from a sample of students as being slightly more homogenous than those of non-students (Peterson 2001). Other studies, however, have reached different results, finding student samples to correspond to results found among non-student samples (Sheth 1970). While student samples are common, researchers continue to debate how closely they mirror real life. Presenting an overview of a large number of different studies in different fields comparing the results of a student sample and a non-student sample for the same studies, Peterson concludes that effect sizes may be larger in studies with student samples, but also that the differences in effect sizes usually are not large (Peterson 2001). The present study acknowledges the risk of a student sample being somewhat more homogenous than the population at large, while keeping in mind that a defining feature of the results was their lack of homogeneity. However, given the aim of the present research, the use of a somewhat more homogenous example was also seen as partly beneficial as it helps delimiting some external influences on the results. Sociolinguistic studies on Québec have found that factors such as age, education and income influences Quebecers in terms of language and language use. By using a homogenous sample, the risk of having the data influenced by these factors could be reduced.

## 4 FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE ESSAYS

Each of the four essays making up the bulk of this thesis each has a somewhat different perspective, but they combine with each other to present a more complete picture of the issue of language within service encounters than do any of the individual essays. This chapter briefly presents the four essays and their major contributions along with their main conclusions.

### 4.1. Essay 1

Essay one, **Toward Bilingual Marketing : a Theoretical Framework**, is conceptual in nature and focuses on sociolinguistic literature and how this stream of research can be applied to different kinds of market situations. In the setting of this thesis, essay one functions as a background for the other three essays in the sense that it introduces concepts from the field of sociolinguistics to a marketing setting. In the subsequent three essays, some of the ideas put forward in this conceptual essay are tested.

The primary contribution of the essay is to introduce concepts from the field of sociolinguistics to marketing, to better understand the role of language for consumers. By looking at aspects such as diglossia in societies as well as bilingualism from a societal rather than an individual perspective, the essay arrives at a framework consisting of four different sets of markets from a perspective of language dynamic on the markets. The essay postulates that only one of these four types of markets is assumed to be suitable for using multiple languages in consumer contacts.

A secondary contribution of the essay is to show that languages contain more functions than just being a mean of communication. Language is also connected to emotions and consumers may feel either more or less inclined to patronise a company not just by the content of the messages that the company sends to the consumers on the market, but also by the language in which it sends them.

Closely linked to the emotions connected to language is the role of language as an identifier for groups of people. The essay introduces the terms of nationalist and nationist languages and show how these differ. While this has been done in sociolinguistics (Fergusson 1967), its implications for marketing and for service interactions constitute a third contribution made in essay one.

Taking a more general perspective on the topic of language and linguistics in marketing, the contribution of this essay is to highlight the fact that languages influence people and markets and that language is an aspect that every company operating in a market with more than language may benefit from using.

The final part of essay one introduces an extensive model for marketers to determine whether a given market carries the potential for using more than one language. The model builds on the major themes in the essay, such as diglossia, bilingualism, register, language shift and characteristics of the speakers.

The main conclusion of essay one is that language seems to have the potential to influence consumers and markets. It is both a mean of communication and a symbol

people identify strongly with; both of which capacities make it susceptible to influence consumers.

#### 4.2. Essay 2

Essay two, **When Language Influences Service Encounters**, is the first of the three essays utilising the empirical research conducted for the thesis, consisting of respondents in Montréal. The first essay is conceptual and the third and fourth essays focus on differences between various groups of consumers from a language perspective. In contrast to these essays, the focus in essay two lies on different kinds of service encounters and how consumers perceive language in different ways depending on in which context they interact with the service provider. The literature review of the essay highlights the communicative side of service interactions pointed out in earlier research on service encounters. Building on this situation, the essay suggests that the lack of a common language between service providers and consumers thus may render service encounters problematic. This is the gap that the essay identifies, as no earlier research has addressed the influence of different languages in the service encounter.

Based on the literature review and a pre-study, the essay proposes three hypotheses concerning:

- **Language preference.** In a market situation where at least one service provider on the market employs an additional language, consumers will display a preference for the service provider using their native language over service providers only using their second language.
- **Degree of bilingualism.** The better the consumer speaks the second language of the market, the less important will a possible price reduction based on language be to him when selecting between service providers.
- **Involvement.** Consumers will consider the group of special context encounters as service encounters in which it is highly important to be able to speak their native language. The importance of language in the group of everyday contexts with a specialised vocabulary will be neither very high nor very low. Language will be perceived as not important in the group of everyday service encounters with no special vocabulary.

Thus, the main contribution of the essay is to empirically show that language is indeed influencing service encounters, being perceived as important by consumers and making them prepared to pay a price premium for being served in their first language. What is more, this influence varies considerably between different kinds of service encounters. When presented with a choice between a service provider using their first language and a service provider using another language present on the market, consumers tend to prefer the service provider using their native language to the extent that they are prepared to pay a price premium to patronise this service provider. While the importance of communication in service encounters, (Heinonen and Strandvik 2005; Wägar 2007) the role of language in specialised situations, (John-Baptiste et al. 2004; Jacobs et al. 2006) and the impact of secondary language skills on consumers (Luna and Peracchio 2001; Tavassoli and Han 2001) have all been discussed, this essay is the first to positively prove that the service encounter depends on language.

A secondary contribution of the essay is the large differences between the importance consumers attach to language in different services. Looking at low-, medium-, and high-involvement service encounters (Bitner et al. 1997), the essay establishes that consumers follow this scale to a very large extent concerning language use in services. Language is seen as strongly important in the three high-involvement service encounters, as not important in the low-involvement encounters and of neither high nor low importance in the medium-involvement encounters. The way consumers perceive using their first language in service encounters is thus seen to be strongly linked to how involved they are themselves in the service.

Another contribution of the essay is the finding that competence in the second language only has a weak impact on the extent to which consumers are prepared to speak it when interacting in services. This lack of correlation between second language skills and willingness to change language corresponds well to the role of language as an identifying factor (Spolsky and Cooper 1991; Fishman 1967), as outlined in essay one.

Essay two arrives at the main conclusion that language, although largely neglected, is of importance in service encounters. Consumers prefer using their first language to the extent that they are prepared to pay a price premium for doing so.

#### **4.3. Essay 3**

Essay three, **The Influence of Gender on Language Use in Service Encounters**, is an empirical essay building on the data gathered on the Canadian and Finnish markets. The essay investigates gender-based differences in how consumers perceive native language use in service encounters with varying degrees of importance. Although previous research exists both on gender differences in services and gender differences in language use, it has not previously been researched whether there are differences in how female and male consumers perceive native language use in service encounters. The essay addresses this research gap, showing that gender has a marked influence on consumers' language attitudes.

The literature review of the essay highlights previous research on differences between female and male consumers. Earlier research has shown that female consumers are more involved in the decision making process than their male counterparts (Falk and Campbell 1997; Dholakia 1999) and tend to focus on other aspects than males when engaged in services (Voss and Cova 2006). This focus on differences between female and male consumers is matched by similar research within the field of sociolinguistics on how females and males differ in their language use and language attitudes. It has consistently been shown that females pay more attention to the way they speak and are more prone to use a higher register of the language – or be the first to switch to language they perceive to be more prestigious (Gal 1979; Trudgill 1983; Kerswill 2003). This essay combines these findings to suggest that as females are more involved as consumers and more conscious about their language use, this would be likely to be reflected in the attention female consumers pay to language. The essay thus focuses on how females/males rate the importance of speaking their native language in service encounters.

The main contribution of the essay is that there indeed appears to exist differences between female and male consumers with regards to the perceived importance of native language use in service encounters. It was found that female consumers pay more attention than male consumers to using their native language. These findings

correspond well to earlier research (Falk and Campbell 1997) finding that women pay more attention cognitively than men in purchasing decisions.

Essay three thus concludes that when comparing groups of consumers by gender, small but still conclusive differences can be found regarding language use in service encounters.

#### 4.4. Essay 4

The purpose of essay four, **Language Influence across Consumer Groups in Services**, is to compare the situation in on the Canadian and the Finnish market. The study made in Canada was repeated in Finland, using the same questionnaire. Essay four thus presents the results as a comparison between four language groups: English speaking Canadians; French speaking Canadians; Finnish speaking Finns, and Swedish speaking Finns. The literature review of the essay focuses on two different streams of research, those of sociolinguistics and of service encounters. The emphasis in the latter is on factors affecting the language situation and language choices in everyday life, while the former stream focuses on factors that may explain why the language influence may vary considerably between both different markets and between different cultural groups on the same market.

The main contribution made in essay four consists of establishing the existence of a strong resemblance between all four language groups. The essay highlights how the four consumer groups rank the nine types of service encounters according to the importance they attach to speaking their native language in each respective service. The results turned out to be almost identical for all groups, indicating that the influence of language in service would appear to be similar across different markets regardless of both economic and sociolinguistic differences between the markets. Including a fifth group as a control group in the study further strengthened this view. The control group, which did not take language into account, produced a significantly divergent pattern from that found for the four main groups in the study. Hence language could be established as the common denominator for the strong resemblance between the groups.

A secondary contribution of essay four was to strengthen one of the findings of essay two, the lack of correlation between language skills in a second language and the willingness to speak it in service encounters. Although this correlation appeared to be somewhat stronger among consumers in Finland than in Canada, it was still weak.

Another contribution of essay four, building on qualitative responses from respondents belonging to the four language groups, was to establish the proposition of language being a more politically sensitive aspect for consumers in Canada than for consumers in Finland. In the responses from Canada, political and ideological reasons were sometimes given as a reason for not wanting to speak the other language on the market. This was the case in both language groups in Canada, but completely absent from both of the language groups on the Finnish market. Instead, language competence appeared to have a larger influence in Finland than in Canada. Looking back to the topic of emotions and perceived justice in the services, it was more common for Canadian respondents to state that they had the right to use their first language and that it was just for them to do so, relating to the importance of perceived fair treatment in service encounters.



Essay four thus concludes that despite the possibility of some differences in the factors that influence consumers, language appears to be having a very similar influence on all language groups.

## 5 CONTRIBUTION

The following chapter concludes the introduction of the thesis. Following the general discussion of the thesis, its contribution to theory and its practical implications for managers are outlined. This is followed by a critical overview of the thesis focusing on its limitations. The chapter finishes with suggestions for further research as prompted by the results of the thesis.

### 5.1. Discussion

This thesis set out to answer one overriding question: does language influence service encounters? The literature review of related fields, both in services and in sociolinguistics, seemed to suggest that this might be the case. Language has been shown to influence consumers' perception of marketing in fields such as advertising. More important from a service perspective was the crucial role attached to communication by many researchers within the field of services. This emphasis on the need for good communication in the interaction between companies and consumers made it probable that something so fundamental for communication as language would influence anything that depends on good communication. Despite this, the role and the possible influence of language had not previously been tested within the field of services and service encounters. This is the perceived research gap that this thesis attempts to fill.

As has been shown in the description of the findings from the study for this thesis, the answer to this question can only be that language is in fact influencing services. Based on the collective results from the essays in this thesis, this seems to be the case to an even larger extent than the researcher had at first expected when starting to research the topic.

During the course of the research investigated in this thesis, other questions presented themselves. Some of these questions, discussed below, had to be left out and saved for further research while some not only corresponded to the main research question but also added to it. The similarities and differences between four different language groups were tested, resulting in the findings that all language groups were remarkably similar in selecting which service encounters to prioritise and in what order, but also finding differences between the groups in how strong the language influence was in these encounters. Closely connected is the role that gender plays, again finding small but notable differences.

From a broader service point of view, the research could establish that a difference exists between high-, medium-, and low-involvement services. That this is the case within service encounters has been demonstrated before (Bitner et al. 1990) and the present study could confirm that these differences extend to, and even seem to grow in services, when the issue of speaking one's native language is taken into question.

The four essays of the thesis collectively contribute to shaping the picture of the importance of language use in service encounters. Essay one made a conceptual case for why this may be important, outlining sociolinguistic characteristics that have been shown to influence both societies and individuals, and making the case for why the same characteristics would be likely to apply for both markets and consumers. The results of essay two confirmed that language does indeed matter to consumers in

service encounters. It was further demonstrated that language influence is at its strongest in service encounters with high involvement, but that consumers are prepared to pay a price premium even in low involvement services in order to be served in their first language. The main question of the thesis was thus answered. Essay three further elaborated on the nature of native language influence in service encounters by showing that it differs according to gender, with language mattering more for female consumers. Essay four, finally, added to the understanding of language influence in service encounters by addressing the situation on two different markets and between four language groups. The findings indicate that language influence was relatively stable across all four groups and that the division into high-involvement, middle-involvement and low-involvement was very stable across the markets.

Based on the findings of the thesis, language influence on consumers in service encounters could be seen to be multi-faceted. Notwithstanding the possibilities of influences outside the limitations of this thesis, at least the following kinds of language influence have been demonstrated:

- A functional influence. In order for the interaction between the consumer and the company to be successful, it has been argued that consumer needs the required competence to take part in value co-creating process with the company (Vargo and Lusch 2004). If the possibility to communicate at full ease with the company is missing, a crucial part of this competence is missing. Being able to communicate effortlessly with the service provider is an important part of good service communication, an importance that grows the more involved the consumer is. This was found to be the case in the study, showing that the respondents perceived using their first language to be most important in high-involvement services and least important in low-involvement service encounters.
- An emotional influence. The literature review suggested that language appears to be something more than just a mean of communication. A number of sociolinguistic studies were cited, showing that language also contains a sense of identity and emotional belonging. The research done for the thesis confirmed this view. Even for service encounters with low involvement, consumers on average wanted a price reduction in order to consider a service provider not using their language. In addition, the correlation between being able to speak the other language on the market and thinking it less important to speak one's native language was low. Looking at the qualitative material, respondents expressed a preference for using their first language, citing not only functional factors but also emotional factors such as an affiliation with the first language, a preference for speaking their native language and a sense of fairness that they should have the same right to speak their first language as other consumers have.

## **5.2. Contribution to theory**

A gap in the service theory was identified in the problem discussion, consisting of a lack of knowledge about how language could influence consumers in service encounters in which they may not be able to speak their native language. Given the increasing heterogeneity of many markets, this is a gap that has become more and more relevant but yet remained unaddressed.

The choice of the research topic constitutes a contribution to the service literature in itself by introducing language into services, as virtually no previous research exists on language influence in service encounters. The thesis contributes to the existing literature on service encounters by filling this gap, showing that language has a significant influence on consumers in service encounters. While previous research into service encounters has emphasised communication and interaction between consumers and service personnel (Grönroos 1982, Surprenant and Solomon 1987), language has been ignored as a factor that could influence this interaction. By showing that language does indeed influence consumers in service encounters, the thesis contributes to the understanding of service encounters by showing that language is a factor that has to be taken into account.

The thesis contributes to the understanding of consumer involvement by introducing language influence in high-involvement, middle-involvement and low-involvement service encounters. The results show that similar differences as those reported by Bitner et al. (1997) are applicable to native language use. Consumers are paying particular attention to language use in high-involvement service encounters and not perceiving it to be important in low-involvement service, with middle-involvement service encounters falling between the two. The thesis thus contributes to the understanding of involvement as well as to how the importance of native language use increases in service encounters directly affecting the consumer's finances or appearance (cf. McDougal and Levesque 2000).

With the description of differences between female and male consumers in terms of perceived importance of native language use in service encounters, the thesis contributes to the existing literature on gender differences in services. By showing that female consumers perceive language to be more important in all types of service encounters in the study, the thesis adds a further dimension to the existing literature on how female consumers are more involved than their male counterparts, as has earlier been described in consumer decision making (Falk and Campbell 1997; Dholakia 1999). The results also show that the established gender differences in language use and language attitude in society, as shown by Trudgill (1983), Gal (1979) and Kerswill (2003) also contain an economic dimension.

In addition to the above contributions to the field of marketing, and service marketing in particular, the findings may also be of interest to the field of sociolinguistics. This is due to the results showing that long-established characteristics of sociolinguistics such as language prestige (cf. Gal 1979; Clyne 1984) and language identity (Brala 2007), combine with service characteristics such as consumer interaction (Surprenant and Solomon 1987), consumer involvement (Bitner et al 1997) and service impact on the consumer (MacDougal and Levesque) to influence how language is perceived and used.

### **5.3. Managerial implications**

The managerial implications of the thesis are potentially wide-reaching, and can be split into two main implications: finding that language is influencing consumers and describing key characteristics of this influence.

The first of these two implications is that the thesis is able to confirm that language is indeed influencing consumers; consumers prefer using their native language in service encounters. The immediate implication of this is then rather obvious for companies operating on markets with more than one large language group: a bilingual or

multilingual strategy is most likely to be beneficial or even necessary, depending on the size of the language groups on the market. In the case of a market on which no competitor is using more than one language, a company deciding to offer its services in the other main language of the market could be very likely to attract consumers speaking that language. In the case of competitors already using more than one language, a company deciding not to follow suit might find it hard to gain consumers using another language than that employed by the company.

The second implication is that the thesis goes some way towards identifying the nature of language influence on consumers in service contexts. The thesis shows that language influence is context-dependent, perceived to be much stronger when the consumer is highly involved in the service encounter or when the outcome of the service encounter has a direct impact on the consumer's person or finances. From a managerial point of view, this means that the findings should be of special importance to managers operating within such service fields as banking, insurance agencies and health care, probably also in fields such as real estate, buying a car or buying a suit / dress where both involvement, the financial investments and the impact on the consumer can be high. However, it has also been shown in the thesis that language influence is significant in all kinds of service encounters. Factors such as personal attachment to, and identification with, one's native language appear to cause many consumers to always prefer using their own language regardless of how simple the service is. These results, that might well be limited to bilingual markets without diglossia, are important to managers on such markets, as they seem to indicate that using only one language probably might not be sufficient, especially not if there are competitors that can serve the consumers in their native language. The thesis could also demonstrate that language is of higher perceived importance to female consumers than to male consumers. The practical implications of this particular difference may be limited in many service businesses, as it would seem far-fetched and illogical that a company would offer one sex the option of choosing which language to use while denying it to the other sex. However, managers operating within branches where female consumers tend to dominate might find that these branches could be especially well suited for using more than one language.

#### **5.4. A critical view of the study**

##### **5.4.1. *Limitations of the study***

Certain limitations in the study, and their implications on the results and the generalisability, need to be addressed.

The questionnaire allowed for testing how consumers were influenced by their language skill in their second language, but did not include other factors that may influence consumers. Two such factors are the perceived risk of the service encounter and the nationalism of the respondents. Both of these would have been beneficial for the study. Many of the comments written by the respondents to motivate their answer addressed the risk involved in service encounters such as a medical visit or a bank loan negotiation, and some also commented on the low risk in buying a coffee regardless of language. Similarly, both English-speaking and French-speaking respondents in Québec sometimes used nationalist and political views to motivate their reasoning for not wanting to take part in a service encounter in the other language on the market. It follows that the inclusion of both of these factors in the questionnaire would have

provided a fuller picture of native language use in service encounters, as it would have allowed for testing of both how the perceived risk and the feeling of nationalism influenced the consumers' choices.

The sample of the study also contained limitations. Although the choice of undergraduate students carried the benefit of a more homogenous sample, it also excluded the possibility to study the influence of language between different age groups and different socioeconomic groups. Numerous sociolinguistic studies have found that age and gender are two of the factors that most strongly influence language use. Essay three in this thesis could prove that this is indeed the case also within service encounters, by identifying a significant difference between males and females. It is probable, based on the existing sociolinguistic literature, that a similar difference would exist between different age groups but the homogeneity in the age of the respondents in the study makes this impossible to test with the data gathered for this thesis.

As was shown in detail in essay one, the sociolinguistic prerequisites for using different languages in service encounters vary to a considerable degree between different kinds of markets. The study in this thesis focused on two markets and deliberately chose markets with a high degree of society bilingualism and a low degree of society diglossia. While well suited to the aim of the thesis, it limits the generalisability of the findings as discussed below.

#### ***5.4.2. Applicability of the results to other markets***

The studies conducted for this thesis took place on two similar markets, Canada and Finland, both of them characterised by the presence of two rather large language groups as well as by society bilingualism without diglossia (cf. Fishman 1967). It would probably not be too farfetched to assume that the results would be more applicable to similar markets and countries in this regard, such as Belgium, Spain, Switzerland or Ukraine to name but a few of the countries characterised by the presence of two or more relatively large language groups.

On other markets, the results may not be as easily applicable. In the absence of similar studies, all that can be done is to speculate, mainly based on known sociolinguistic facts, about how the importance of native language use would be perceived. As shown in essay one, there are many multilingual markets, often characterised by diglossia, on which one given language is preferred even by native speakers of another language. Lacking studies on such markets, including Paraguay or French regions such as Brittany or Corsica, there is no reason to believe that the high preference for the native language use as found in this thesis would be echoed on such markets.

The applicability of the results to markets where one sole language strongly dominates in all spheres may be divided. As outlined in the selection of markets for this study, the research question in itself would hardly be immediately transferable to such a market, as it may not be perceived to be very relevant. However, there is no reason to believe that the strong preference for one's native language in service encounters would be lower among consumers on such markets. Given the absence of everyday interactions in which the need for another language occurs, such a preference might be most readily experienced when away from the own market. As more and more people are going abroad either as tourists or expatriates, such situations are no longer unusual.

On all markets, it is important to keep in mind that there may be reasons why some consumers could be reluctant to use their native language, such as may be the case among immigrants acculturated to the country who might view their native language as an unwanted sign of them being different, and may insist on using the language of their new country (cf. Berry and Krishnan 1992).

### ***5.4.3. Suggestions for further research***

The study in this thesis focused on nine types of service encounters on two markets. Two immediate possibilities for extensions thus present themselves. One would be to study other kinds of service encounters, possibly specialising on a given branch of services. Another possibility for further research would be to study more markets; Belgium, Spain, Switzerland and the United States are just some of the multilingual societies that are similar enough to Canada and Finland for the types of service encounters used in this thesis to be relevant and probably perceived in much the same way. The sociolinguistic situation may, however, be very different, possibly producing different results.

As outlined in the thesis, the service encounters included in this study consisted of nine kinds of services that are fairly common in first world countries such as Canada and Finland. Multilingualism is, however, not in any way limited to such countries and research on the role of language in multilingual countries such as India, Indonesia, Kenya or South Africa would be most interesting and crucial to put the results of this thesis into a truly global context. It is probable that other kinds of service encounters may be better suited in some of these countries, and a pre-study such as the one conducted before this study would most likely be needed in order to solicit the most appropriate encounters to study.

The study for this essay focused on consumers belonging to long-established communities within the counties in which the research was carried out. Each of the four language groups makes up a large regional majority in the parts of the two countries where the research took place, and each one is an official language of the country. It would be interesting to conduct similar research on more recent immigrant communities, making up smaller but often more geographically concentrated societies, to compare the possible differences within service encounters regarding language views and language use. Based on findings from the field of sociolinguistics, it might not be too farfetched to assume that consumers being relatively new in a country and not belonging to a majority in any part of the same country might view language use in services rather differently compared to other consumers.

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**ESSAYS**



# Langue Use in Business

## A conceptual model

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### ABSTRACT

**The last years have seen an unprecedented upsurge in multi-language use in marketing, ranging from small local companies to the largest multinationals. During the last decades, international cooperation, immigration and expatriate workers have all become more and more common, leading to an increase in encounters between companies and consumers that do not necessarily share a native language. In addition, the position of most minority languages has been strengthened. Despite this, virtually no research exists on the topic how consumers are affected by situations in which they do not speak the language of the service provider or vice versa. Building on the sociolinguistic literature on society characteristics, this paper outlines the characteristics defining language use on different markets and presents a model for marketers based on these characteristics.**

*Keywords: language use in marketing, marketing and sociolinguistics, marketing in multiple languages*

## Introduction

A prospective bank customer walks into a bank office with the intention of negotiating a bigger loan. As he sits down to start enquiring about the terms of the loan and eventually to settle it, he finds that the bank employee is a fluent and eloquent French speaker. What consequences will this have for the service encounter between our prospective customer and the bank?

The answer must be that it depends on factors such as who the customer is and where this bank is located. If the interaction takes place in Paris, in Geneva or in Québec, no particular reaction is likely. The prospective customer is most likely<sup>5</sup> to be a French speaker himself and the fact that the bank employee speaks French is not something he would even reflect upon as he takes it for granted. At the other end of the spectre, if the interaction took place in New York, Buenos Aires or Stockholm, the customer would most likely not be a native French speaker. If the French-speaking bank employee were less fluent in his second language, the customer could be forgiven for finding it rather strange to employ someone who doesn't speak the main language of the customers on that market.

The two situations above represent two extremes – that a bank employee in Paris speaks French would seem to be as obvious as it would be outrageous for a bank employee in Buenos Aires to only speak French. Between these two rather evident situations, however, several other and less obvious situations exist, each of them of more relevance to understanding the role of language in service encounters.

The interaction could take place in a bilingual city where French is the majority language, such as Montréal or Brussels. The response would then depend on who the prospective customer is. If he is a French-Canadian or a Walloon, he will expect to be served in French. What is more, as a member of the majority group in a bilingual city where language has come to be seen to be linked to both identity and politics, he might find it offensive if the bank employee does not speak French. If, on the other hand, he is an English Canadian or a Flemish, he, as a member of the minority, may be more used to not always being served in his native language but still react negatively when that happens. In a bilingual city where it is French that is the minority language, i.e. Ottawa or Berne, the situation might well be the opposite.

These are rather traditional situations, but today's increasingly international world presents many other possibilities. Even though the usual bank customer in Paris or in Geneva would speak French, both cities are home to relatively large groups of both immigrants and temporary expatriates. If our customer is an English expatriate working in Geneva, he might be used to speaking French in ordinary everyday interactions but could still be a bit unsure about the finer nuances of the banking terminology in French. He might resign himself to negotiating the terms of his loan in French, but may reconsider if another bank in Geneva would offer him the possibility to negotiate the loan with a bank employee fully fluent in English for just a marginally higher price. If the interaction took place in London and our customer is one of the roughly 200.000 French expatriates in the city, would he also be more inclined to take the loan at a London bank where the bank is fluent in French?

There is no definitive, all-inclusive answer to these questions. In the end, it will come down to the individual. How fluent is the Geneva-based Englishman in French and how

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<sup>5</sup> Based on the census returns for each city

much emphasis does he place on price versus feeling? Would the bank customer in Montréal be affected by his personal stance on the Québec sovereignty issue? Although it will never be possible to say how the individual consumer will react, this paper argues that for some consumers, and in some markets, the language spoken by the service personnel will influence how they view the service provider – and even which service provider they chose. Although language could be of importance in all marketing activities, this is likely to be especially true in services as the service encounter is characterised by mutual interactions between the consumer and the service personnel (Surprenant and Solomon 1987) and language difficulties may be an obstacle to this interaction (Marcella and Davies 2004). As marketers put more emphasis on the role of consumers as co-creators of value during service interactions with the company (cf Vargo and Lusch 2004, Grönroos 2008, Payne, Storbacka and Frow 2008), this co-creation process further highlights the importance of language as a lack of understanding, or even a halting understanding, might constitute an impediment to the consumer and the company being able to interact as well as possible.

The paper addresses the situation of how markets differ with regards to language use and language influence on consumers, and argues that this influence is likely to vary to a considerable extent, depending on the sociolinguistic situation on the market. By building on research within the field of sociolinguistics and adjusting the findings to a marketing perspective, the paper presents a conceptual framework for factors influencing consumers on multilingual markets. The literature review thus builds on findings from the field of sociolinguistics adjusted to a service point of view. The paper contributes to the field of marketing by identifying the importance of languages, and developing a conceptual model for how the importance of native language use for consumers on different kinds of markets varies.

### **Language Use in Business**

Marketing research has usually taken it for granted that companies and the consumers share the same language, and the role that language can play in the communication between consumers and the service personnel who do not share the same native language has thus been ignored (Visser 1997, Clarke 2000, Marcella and Davies 2004). The influence of language will of course vary between different kind of markets but also between different kinds of marketing activities, presumably being at its highest in service encounters, as these are interactions usually involving an exchange of communication between the company and the consumer (Surprenant and Solomon 1987). However, language is also related to identity (Brala 2007), and the extent to which a company uses a second language should thus take into consideration not only how well the consumer can speak a second language (Marcella and Davies 2004) but also in which way the consumer identifies with the language and the ways in which different languages are perceived by the consumers on the market.

### ***Languages as Identifiers***

Languages do not only function as conveyors of communication, they can also communicate identities and loyalties (Spolsky and Cooper 1991). By choosing to use or not to use a specific language, a company can communicate its values and identities. Even when no such communication is intended by the company, consumers might still perceive it. Even an absence of communication can be perceived just as strongly as

communication itself, and is often perceived negatively by the consumers (cf Calonius 1989).

In general, it could be assumed that the tenser the relationships between different groups on a market are, the more loaded the question of languages as identifiers becomes. In their look at the socio-linguistic environment of Jerusalem's old town, specifically in relation to Hebrew and Arabic, Spolsky and Cooper include a chapter on signs used in the old town, both by local authorities and by companies. (Spolsky and Cooper 1991). One of their findings is that the languages a company uses display its loyalties, and that the order of the languages can do the same. Given the tense situations, the perceived loyalties of companies have a huge influence on which consumers they attract. The first noticeable hint of a company's loyalties is its signs. In Jerusalem, the choice between Arabic and Hebrew immediately tells consumers and passers-by the loyalties of the company, while English is used as a neutral language. It should be stressed that no language is neutral in itself. While the use of English may be neutral in bilingual cities such as Jerusalem, Barcelona or Helsinki, it certainly is not as neutral in Montreal or Miami (Cf *ibid.* : 74-94).

The use of a language has a direct influence over which people that will feel connectedness when reading the company's signs and who will feel alienated. Spolsky and Cooper demonstrate the feelings involved in this by discussing trilingual signs in Jerusalem on which the Arabic and English texts have been desecrated so that only the Hebrew text remains. Language may also influence how people feel about their own identity, to the extent that it has been demonstrated that people feel differently about their own identity when speaking another language as compared to when speaking their native language (Brala 2007; Pavlenko 2006). It would thus seem safe to conclude that by deciding to use a language in a multilingual setting, the company puts itself in a situation in which consumers might see the company as identifying with a certain group, regardless of whether that has been the company's intention or not.

### ***Regional languages and immigrant languages***

Many markets are characterised by the presence of either regional or immigrant languages, and quite often both. In the individual encounter with a consumer, it would usually be of less importance whether the consumer is a speaker of a regional language or an immigrant language. On an aggregated scale, however, and especially in the long run, there would seem to be some noticeable differences. Many societies and countries are undergoing a process called language shift, the process in which speakers of a language gradually abandon that language and start speaking another language. For most immigrant languages, the life-span has been shown to be relatively short, with language shift setting in rather quickly (cf Holmes 2001). In the typical case, the first generation arriving in a new country will retain their native language as their strongest one. Their children will be bilingual in their native language and the language of the new country while the next generation often will be monolingual in the language of the new country, or at the very least have that language as their dominant language (*ibid.*). Research within the field of consumer behaviour has shown how this process of immigrant language shift influences consumer acculturation, and how language shift often is complete within one or two generations, with the first generation born in the new country using the language of that country to a larger extent than their native language (Oswald 1999; Linridge, Hogg and Shah 2004)



This process of language shift can be both faster and slower depending on many factors. One influential factor in language shift is the prestige the speakers attach to their native language and to the competing language(s). It has been suggested that it is easier to retain a major world language such as French even in small communities, such as the French-Americans in the US state of Maine, because of the high international prestige attached to the language (Holmes 2001). Even for very small languages, the prestige its own speakers attach to it has been shown to delay, though not stop, language shift (cf. Clyne 1984). For most immigrant languages, though, their speakers tend to switch over to the dominant language on the market within a few generations. Another strong factor is the size of the minority. In general, the smaller the language community is, the faster will the language change. In the case of some very large immigrant communities, such as Spanish speakers in the US, the population has become sufficiently large to take on many characteristics of a regional language, thus postponing or even terminating the language shift.

Regional languages are in many ways different from immigrant languages. Typically, immigrant languages are dispersed between the largest cities of a country and rarely making up a large percentage of the population anywhere in the country, thus leading to the relatively fast language shift discussed above. Regional languages, in contrast, are usually concentrated to a part of the country and may constitute the majority of the population in that region. Areas in which a regional language is a majority language can be found in most North American and European countries. Partly because of this, language shift is much slower for regional languages and is often not occurring at all. (cf. Holmes 1991). Whereas immigrant languages usually disappear within a few generations, quite many regional languages have been spoken in the same region for hundreds of years.

Where does this leave the marketer? It would appear to depend on the market. In a region where a minority language is spoken by a large proportion of the population, using that language might well be an advantage, or even a requirement, for the company. In a city with a relatively large and recent immigrant population, the use of the immigrant language may well appeal positively especially to those in the first generation although already the second generation may prefer using the main language of the market. Taken together, different characteristics of the market influence the ideal language use. What is common to most markets is the existence of consumer groups, sometimes of considerable size, not being native speakers of the main language of the market. When the consumer and the company personnel do not share the same language, the interaction between them will depend on the language competence of both the consumer and the service personnel (Marcella and Davies 2004). Given the increased importance attached to the consumers role as a co-creator of value (Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Vargo and Lusch 2004; Payne, Storbacka and Frow 2008), language could pose two obstacles to such a co-creation process. The first is the very concrete obstacle of non-satisfying outcome because of communication difficulties caused by language, as pointed out by Marcella and Davies (2004). The other is the danger of the service personnel using language in a way that the consumer might object to. In order to avoid the latter, an understanding of how bilingualism, diglossia and sociolinguistic factor may influence the consumer would be important.

### ***Language Switching and Impact on Bilingual Market Communication***

For a company intending to serve its customers in more than one language, it might turn out to be an oversimplification of the situation to look only at the existence of

linguistic minorities. Equally, or even more important, is the role that the different languages play in the society, as it tells the company about the situations in which consumer are likely to prefer native language use and, perhaps more importantly, in which situation native language use might not be desired by the consumer. In other words, both the level of bilingualism and diglossia has to be taken into account. Diglossia (from Greek : *δι* two *γλωσσία* languages) is a term used to describe situations in which two languages, or sometimes two highly divergent forms of the same language, are used for different purposes by the same speakers in society. On a practical level, this means that constant language switching takes place; the same speakers use certain languages in certain situations.

The following discussion presents different types of societies based on bilingualism and diglossia before moving on to discuss its relevance for marketers in assessing the need for a multilingual marketing strategy on the market.

### *Diglossia and Society Bilingualism*

Within a society characterised by diglossia, two languages are used for different purposes. The term was first coined by Psycharis, describing the diglossic situation of Demotic Greek and Katharevousa (High level Greek). It has been further developed mainly by Ferguson (1959) and Fishman (1967). A historical example of diglossia existed at times in czarist Russia between French and Russian. In the higher classes of society, French was used as a high status language amongst peers while Russian was spoken to the servants and to outsiders. A contemporary example of diglossia can be found in German speaking Switzerland in which the local dialects, Switzertüütsch, are used for most everyday situations and conversations while the standard languages, Hochdeutsch, is used in printing, in the media and in more formal circumstances. (Trudgill 1995)

### *Diglossia with Bilingualism*

In a situation with both diglossia and bilingualism, most speakers in the society speak two languages but consistently use them in different situations. An often given example is Paraguay (Rubin 1985). Virtually all Paraguayans are bilingual in Spanish and Guaraní, and both languages are official in the country. In practice, Guaraní is used in the homes and in informal situations while Spanish is used in formal and official situations

### *Diglossia without Bilingualism*

In a diglossic setting without bilingualism, some speakers are bilingual while most are not. A typical example is Russia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Amongst the higher classes, French was the cultivated language for education, literature and cultural life. At the same time, the vast majority of Russians were of course monolinguals with no knowledge of French.

### *Bilingualism without Diglossia*

From a North European outlook, bilingualism without diglossia is the normal form of bilingualism. It describes a bilingual society in which both languages are spoken natively by many people and both languages are used in all or at least in most situations by their speakers. In Brussels, both Flemish and French speakers tend to use their respective language in all situations, as is the case with Spanish and Catalan in Barcelona or French and English in Montréal.

### *Neither Bilingualism nor Diglossia*

A society with neither bilingualism nor diglossia is a society without any linguistic minorities or any foreign high prestige language. Purely monolingual countries are relatively rare; the only European country without any linguistic minorities is Iceland.

There are situations that fall between some of these. In many bilingual countries, all four situations can easily be found by looking at different communities. By strictly classifying only whole countries under one category, one misses out the local variations that often exist.

### *Potential for Multilingual Market Communication*

Having defined the different kinds of societies based on language prevalence, the following discussion classifies them according to their potential for using bilingual market communication in at least one minority language. The outcome of this discussion is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1 Potential for Multilingual Market Communication on Different Types of Markets**

<b>Market type</b>	<b>Potential for Bilingual Market Communication</b>
Multilingualism and Diglossia	<b>No</b>
Multilingualism without Diglossia	<b>Yes</b>
Diglossia without Multilingualism	<b>No</b>
Neither Multilingualism nor Diglossia	<b>No</b>

In a truly diglossic bilingual society, the potential need for bilingual marketing might not be urgent. In societies of this kind, all individuals will use one language in economic settings, so the introduction of another language is not motivated from the viewpoint of reaching new consumers or enabling more consumers to understand. In such societies, the use of the language not commonly associated with business life might primarily be to catch consumer attention. However, constant use of the language not normally associated with business would not be likely to achieve results and to print all materials and signs in it would probably turn out to be unnecessary expenses. In a truly diglossic

and bilingual society, the need for bilingual marketing is not as great as in other markets. It is useful to keep in mind, though, that very few societies are truly diglossic and bilingual.

In a bilingual society without diglossia, the potential for bilingual marketing is at its highest. In such societies, the use of an additional language means that new consumers are reached, and enables building relationships with these consumers. It is also in these societies that it is most urgent for minority language speakers to get service in their native language, as it may often be harder for them to interact with companies in other languages than their own.

In a diglossic society without bilingualism, the need for using more than one language in business is questionable. In the original case, 18<sup>th</sup> century Russia, the use of French may have implied higher quality than the use of Russian. Similar tendencies are not unheard of today; in many countries English is seen as a prestigious language and a minority is often able to speak it. In almost any European country, company street signs and marketing slogans can be seen containing English. The use of English in these countries is almost never to reach an English-speaking consumer segment, but rather to make use of high prestige language or to attract international tourists. The usefulness of employing such a language stands in direct proportion to how that language is perceived in the society.

In a society with only one language, there is obviously no urgent need for a company to employ another language.

### **Impact on Bilingual Market Communication**

Out of the four different kinds of societies based on diglossia and bilingualism, only one type would appear to display a clear potential for bilingual market communication. Paradoxically, it is the same type of society in which the use of bilingualism could be expected to cause resentment. In the three other kinds of societies, bilingualism is not a contested issue but neither does it serve any purpose to reach consumers other than in the already discussed example of catching attention.

Given the fact that only one out of four possible situations is deemed as beneficial for even contemplating bilingual market communication, it should be remembered that the four kinds of societies presented here are not evenly distributed. Both bilingualism and diglossia on the one hand as well as neither bilingualism nor diglossia on the other hand are restricted to a few countries, though both certainly appear more often at local levels. Paradoxical as it may seem, the two cases that seem to be excluding each other – bilingualism without diglossia and diglossia without bilingualism – are in fact very often found together. The explanation for this is that it involves different set of languages. Taking the case of Helsinki, the situation of Swedish and Finnish is largely defined by bilingualism without diglossia. On the other hand, the case of either Finnish and English or Swedish and English presents a situation with diglossia without bilingualism. Both these cases are often to be found in the same societies, and both of them are probably more common than either bilingualism with diglossia or neither bilingualism nor diglossia, at least in Europe.

Having arrived at the conceptual conclusion that only markets characterised by bilingualism without diglossia are ideal for bilingual market communication, it has to be pointed out that this situation in itself says very little about whether bilingual

market communication is indeed profitable for the company. There are other criterions that have to be met. Chief among these are the size of the minority in absolute numbers, its size in relation to the majority, its purchasing power, the extent to which it identifies with its language and the views of the consumers belonging to the majority. In other words, a bilingual society without diglossia is usually a prerequisite for even contemplating using bilingual market communication, but is in itself not enough to decide to implement it.

In some multilingual societies, such as Catalonia, Canada, Belgium or Switzerland, more than one language has such a strong position that it would be hard for a company to do business without using more than one language. In other multilingual societies without diglossia but where the regional language is less strong, the potential of using more than one language will also depend on the kind of service the company is offering. Given the high importance of communication in service encounters (Bitner 1990; Grönroos 1984; Surprenant and Solomon 1987), such services that are of high perceived importance (Bitner, Booms and Tetreault 1990) or are having a direct impact on the consumer (McDougal and Levesque 2000) might well turn out to be the services in which consumers attach the highest importance to being served in the native language.

### **Sociolinguistics and the Individual Consumer**

This far, the discussion has focused on characteristics of societies and markets, but it should be kept in mind that consumers as individuals display certain sociolinguistic characteristics. Three characteristics in particular have been shown to influence the language use of the individual: age (Gal 1979; Holmes 2001; Wardhaugh 2002; Watt 2002), gender (Gal 1979; Holmes 2001; MacKinnon 1982; Trudgill 1983) and social status (Jahangiri 1980, Holmes 2001, Trudgill 1983). Understanding these characteristics is important for the company, as they offer guidelines for when a consumer is more or less likely to prefer native language use.

Age would appear to be the most evident of the three. In any society in which a language shift is underway, older speakers will tend toward the language being replaced while younger speakers are using the new language in more and more situations. A well-documented case is the Austrian city of Oberwart in which German has largely replaced Hungarian as the main language of the city (Gal 1978; 1979). As Table 2 illustrates, Oberwart presents a rather typical case of language shift. The younger the speaker, the more situations in which he / she will use German rather than Hungarian. From being a mainly Hungarian town up until the early 1920s, in the 1970s the younger generation only used Hungarian when speaking to God (prayers, religious services) and to older peasants.

**Table 2** Choice of language in Oberwart depending on whom the speaker addresses

Speaker	Age of Speaker	God	Older peasants	Parents	Friends and workmates	Children	Doctor and government
A	63	Hu	Hu	Hu	Hu	GHu	G
B	61	Hu	Hu	Hu	Hu	GHu	G
C	58	Hu	Hu	Hu	GHu	GHu	G
D	52	Hu	Hu	Hu	GHu	GHu	G
E	27	Hu	Hu	GHu	G	G	G
F	25	Hu	Hu	GHu	G	G	G
G	22	Hu	Hu	G	G	G	G

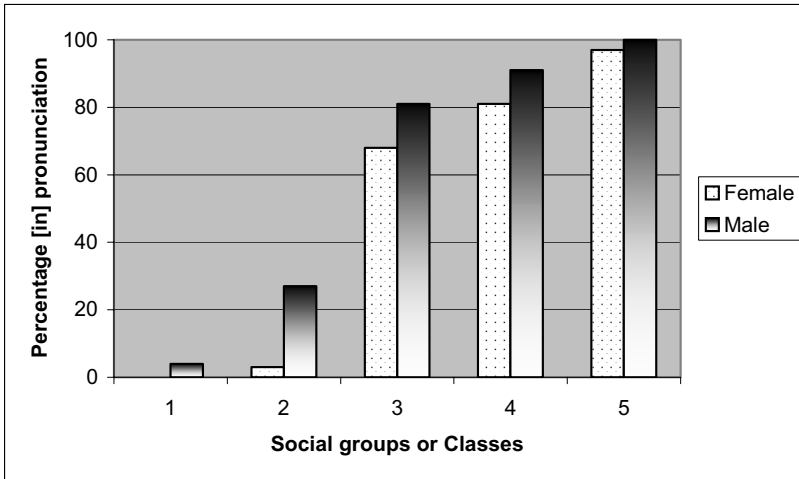
*Holmes 2001, building on Gal 1979*

Apart from age, gender seems to have a strong impact on language shift. Studies on different language communities reach a pattern comparable to the age-pattern of Table 2, in finding that women are more prone to language change than men – young women are thus the group most prominent in language shift (cf MacKinnon 1982; Gal 1978).

Findings from many different countries and societies are virtually unanimous in finding that women not only take the lead in language shift from one language to another, they are also in the forefront of language change within the same language, typically with women adhering more closely to what is perceived to be the standard language or the more prestigious variant. (cf Wolfram 1969; Trudgill 1983; Kerswill 2003). This phenomenon seems to be found among virtually all cultures and social groups, from upper class New York (Labov 1966) across rural England (Watt 2002) and Austria (Gal 1978) to Teheran (Jahangiri 1980). It is outlined in Table 3, illustrating the occurrence of standard pronunciation of the ending ‘-ing’ in English. As can be seen, males are using a less prestigious form within each social group. It can also be seen that the social groups with the reported highest status has the lowest occurrence of less prestigious language. The use of “correct” language is thus connected both with higher social status and with females<sup>6</sup>. Research on language use in other societies have produced strikingly similar results (Labov 1996; Hudson 1996; Kerswill 2003; Watt 2002).

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<sup>6</sup> The terms correct language, class and social status are here reported as in the sources

**Table 3 Vernacular [ɪn] by sex and social group in Norwich**

*Holmes 1991, based on Trudgill 1983*

Regarding the status attached to the language, it influences the extent to which speakers use it and retain it (Holmes 1991). In many diglossic societies, one language is often perceived to be of higher status, such as formal German in Switzerland (Trudgill 1995) or Spanish in Paraguay (Rubin 1985). In a situation with no language shift, the consequences are only down to variety, influencing in which situations the different language are used. In situations where a language shift is underway, the social status attached to the new language can have more far-reaching consequences. In one well-documented cases, Hungarian-speaking women in Austria were actively searching for German-speaking husbands rather than fellow Hungarian-speakers. (Gal 1978). While such preferences might not be readily generalisable, they show that being a native speaker of a given language is by no means to be equated with preferring that language in situations where another language is perceived to have higher status.

There are thus a limited number of factors that have been shown to strongly influence language shift. Looking back to the discussion on regional languages and immigrant languages, it should be kept in mind that language shift can be found within both types. However, the frequency would seem to differ. For many regional languages, no language shift is taking place; this is especially the case when the speakers of the regional language also make up a regional majority and are speaking a language of high prestige. Immigrant languages, on the other hand, are almost always in a process of rather rapid language shift (Holmes 1991).

In Table 4, the main characteristics of speakers in language shift situations as described in the literature are outlined. From a marketing point of view, these are factors to take into careful consideration. In markets where language shift is underway, companies should pay heed both to the attitudes attached to the language and to the segment they are targeting. In many societies, the language being replaced is connected to the older generation and to lower social status and thus a company using it may be connected with the same attributes in the eyes of the consumers. That is not to say that the

language may not carry a strong emotional feeling on the part of its speakers that also could carry across to a company using it. To at least some extent, the choice of whether to use the language or not is thus dependent on the segment. The more the segment is made up of characteristics such as young, urban, educated and female, the less suitable may using the language be. However, it should be remembered that this only applies to markets currently experiencing a language shift. Neither minority nor regional languages should per se be seen as being in a process of language shift, as many language communities such as French in Canada, Belgium and Switzerland, Catalan in Spain, Welsh in the UK or German in Italy are being stable without language shift taking place.

**Table 4 Characteristics of speakers in language shift**

<b>Higher-prestige language</b>	<b>Lower-prestige language</b>
Female	Male
Urban	Rural
Young	Old
High-education	Low-education
Progressive	Conservative
Upper-class	Lower-class

Based on Holmes 1991, Gal 1979, Trudgill 1983, Wardhaugh 2002

### **Language Variety**

A final characteristic of many societies that will impact consumers' language use is that of different language varieties. In sociolinguistics, variety (sometimes called 'code') refers to the way most people speak somewhat differently depending on the situation. Almost all people speak in one way with their family, a second way with close friends, a third way in business situations etc. All people have different varieties of speak for different situations, but in many diglossic societies, different languages are used for these different purposes. The Italian village Sauris, some 90km north of Venice, presents one of the most well-documented examples of different languages for different varieties (Denison 1971; 1997 Dorian 2002). In the village, German is the language used by the villagers in the home, Friulian is the language used in the street and between friends while Italian is the language used in more formal situations. The village thus presents a strongly triglossic society. The case of Sauris is unusual in that it involves three languages for different purposes (varieties) but the principle is hardly unique. Just as a middle-aged Sauri man would speak German with his wife and children, Friulian with his drinking mates in the pub and Italian when taking a bank loan, so a monolingual Englishman would probably speak English in one way with his family, in another with his mates at the pub and in a third way with his bank manager. This is a situation of which marketers need to be aware. Just as the monolingual Englishman might find it strange to use his family variety of speaking when dealing with his bank or



any other company, so many speakers in a diglossic situation may react negatively to using a language they reserve for some varieties in a completely different one. This presents a challenge for the marketer, as merely stating the presence of more than one language on the market does not in itself guarantee any potential for using more than one language when dealing with consumers.

### **Model for Language use on Markets**

Both markets and consumers could thus be defined, in terms of language affiliation and language use, by a number of rather well documented but sometimes not obvious characteristics. Having outlined in these main sociolinguistic characteristics affecting both individuals and societies, the paper presents the following model, Figure 1, for language use on different types of markets. Taking into account the different characteristics presented in this paper, building on sociolinguistic literature and the findings therein, the model illustrates the main factors for influencing language use.

In the model, the difference between regional languages and immigrant languages is maintained; as outlined above, these generally present rather different situations. The upper part of the model describes the situation of regional minority languages while the lower part presents the somewhat simpler situation for immigrant languages. For regional languages, the influence of diglossia, society bilingualism, language shift, status and the size of the minority are all relevant (cf Fishman 1967, Gal 1979, Rubin 1985) while the main characteristics for immigrant languages come down to the pace of the language shift and the size of the immigrant community (cf Holmes 1991). It will be seen from the model that whatever the characteristics of the market, the size of the group(s) speaking another language than the main one and the purchasing power of this group will affect markets.

For regional languages, the first two levels of the model takes into consideration whether the market is diglossic and multilingual. As outlined in Table 1, building on the different kind of societies using the concepts introduced by Fishman (1967), a non-diglossic market with more than one language actively spoken is likely to be the only market with a high potential for multilingual marketing. Only in such a society is there likely to be a critical mass of consumers who prefer using their own language in all situations, sometimes not even being able to use another language. The model further proposes, based on existing research into language attitude in societies undergoing language change (Gal 1978; 1979), that the possible effect of language change on the market should be taken into consideration. For immigrant languages, the picture is less complicated, the model suggesting that the speed of language change is the main concern for marketers. If the language shift is slow, as is often the case with large and regionally concentrated groups such as Spanish speakers in the US, there is likely to be a potential for targeting these consumers in their own language. In the case of Spanish speakers, it has been shown that the language in which they are served relates to their satisfaction with the service (Morales, Cunningham, Brown, Liu, and Hays 1999). For

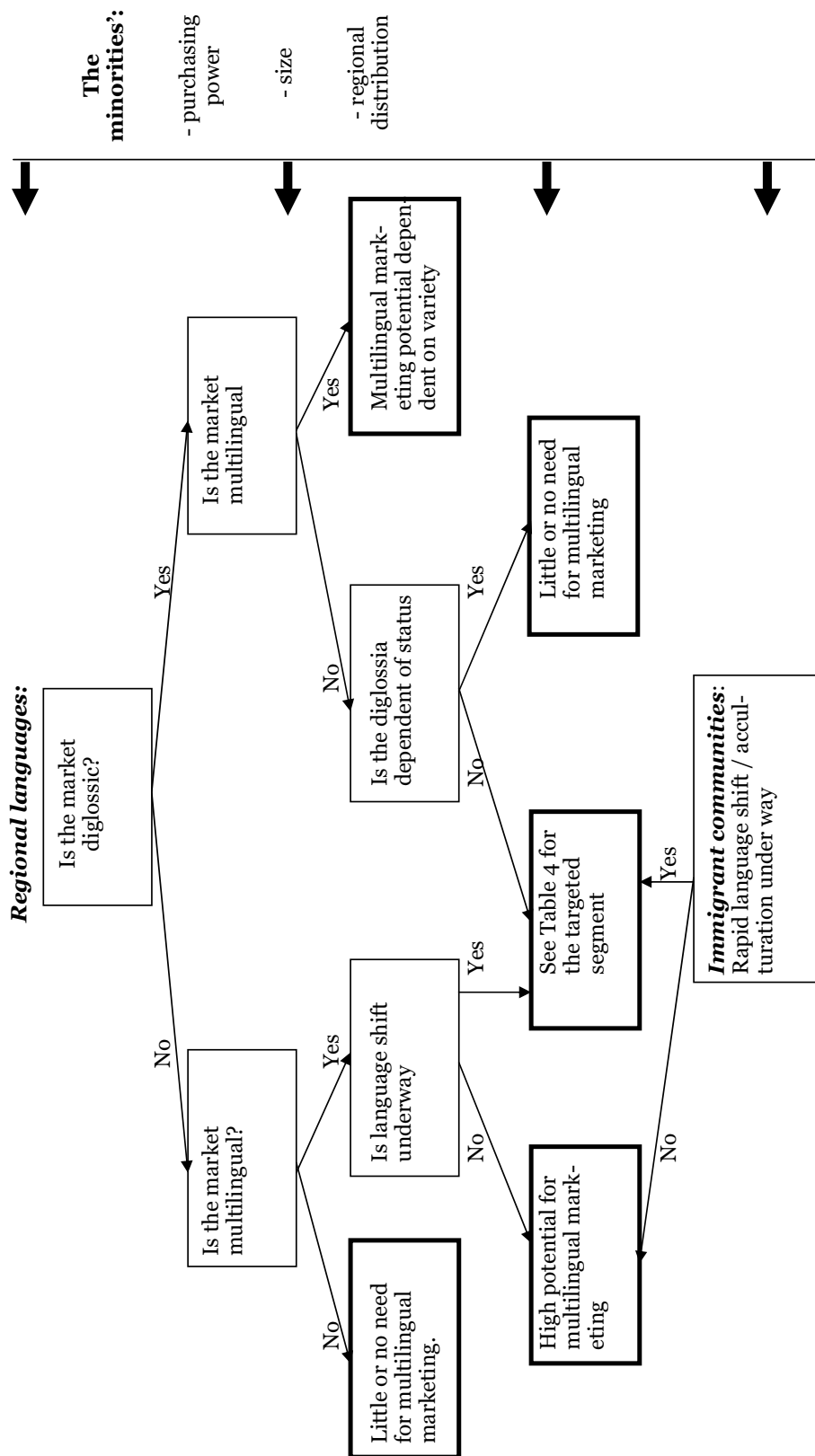


Figure 1 A model for language use in marketing

immigrant languages that are experiencing rapid language change, as well as for immigrant languages in the same situation, the model suggests a segmentation based on the division between consumer characteristics outlined in Table 4. If the targeted segment on such markets is defined by characteristics such as being young, urban, educated and female, the experiences from sociolinguistics suggest that the segment may not have a preference for using its native language. It should be kept in mind that Table 1 (society multilingualism and diglossia) overrides Table 4, as outlined in the model, so that gender, age and social status are less likely to have a strong influence on markets with two or more language groups of which neither is experiencing language shift, such as English and French in Canada, Dutch and French in Belgium or even German, French and Italian in Switzerland.

The model represents a simplified view of reality. In practice, it is not always be to categorically state for every market whether or not it is diglossic, multilingual etc; there are situations which fall somewhere in between. Nonetheless, it is usually possible to determine the main characteristic of markets accurately. Keeping in mind these simplifications, the model should prove to be useful both for research into language use on different markets and for practitioners.

## **Conclusions and Managerial Implications**

Most countries and markets are characterised by the presence of more than one language. It may be the case of two or more languages having been spoken side by side for a long time (English and French in Canada; German, French and Italian in Switzerland) or of recent immigrant groups (Arabic in France, Turkish in Germany). It can be the case of regional languages (Catalan in Spain, Welsh in the UK) or of major world languages (German in Italy, Spanish in the US). In most countries, it is a mix of several of these factors.

On such markets with more than one language, companies will have to consider which languages to use. While it may be ideal to use all languages of a market, such efforts are not always possible or at least not profitable – either because of some languages being reasonably small or because of speakers of these languages preferring to use the main language of the market. It should be kept in mind that the influence of language varies from market to market and depends on many factors. On a market where at least two languages are having a strong position, a company using only the main language runs the risk of being shunned by many consumers. At the same time, there are markets with more than one language in which consumers may even prefer not to use their native language, because of the different roles assigned to each language or the attitudes connected to the language. Understanding the sociolinguistic set-up of the market is thus crucial when contemplating which language(s) to use. Especially in contexts where there is an interaction between the company and consumers, the role of language is likely to increase the more involved the consumer gets in the interaction, as most interactions between consumers and companies' service personnel require communication (Surprenant and Solomon 1987). In order to facilitate the consumers role as a co-creator of value (cf Vargo and Lusch 2004), understanding when using the consumer's native language would be desired and when it may not be wanted is crucial to the service company.

To address this situation, this paper introduced a conceptual model based on two very common sociolinguistic characteristics of markets: diglossia and social bilingualism. By evaluating markets according to these criteria, the paper proposed that a multilingual

market strategy is likely to be best suited on markets characterised by social bilingualism but by little or no diglossia. The paper further addressed the different challenges posed by regional and immigrant languages, and how different segments might prefer different language in markets experiencing a language shift.

### **Future Research**

This paper focused on first describing the environment in which bilingual market communication can be expected to be at its most effective, and the different meanings that can be assigned to the use of a certain language in different contexts. It was suggested that the characteristics of the market are having a large impact, and that only some markets are well-suited for multilingual marketing efforts. More research would be needed on these topics.

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## WHEN LANGUAGE INFLUENCES SERVICE ENCOUNTERS

***In which service contexts do language and language skills influence the decision-making of bilingual consumers?***

### **Abstract**

May language be influencing service encounters? The importance of good communication in service encounters is a well-known phenomenon, but not much attention has been paid to situations in which the communication has to be carried out in another language than the customer's own. This paper, building on data gathered from 248 respondents in Canada, finds that language is indeed having a significant impact in all kinds of services, and that this influence is at its strongest in services characterised either by communication or high-involvement.

## Introduction

In a world with Internet, a global economy and international cooperation in a range of fields, different kinds of international interactions are increasing with more people spending time in countries other than their own and learning languages other than their own. Luna and Peracchio (2001), building on Grosjean (1982) and Hoffman (1991), make the assumption that more than half the consumers in the world might already be speaking more than one language. In Europe, most countries have both older linguistic minorities (e.g. Catalans in Spain, Welsh in the UK, Swedes in Finland) and more recent immigrant groups (e.g. Arabs in France, Turks in Germany, Poles in the UK). In combination with increased language competence, a situation emerges where bilingualism is becoming increasingly common. As more and more persons get bilingual and more markets are characterized by the presence of bilinguals, consumers and companies are facing situations in which the consumer is dealing with companies in another language than his native language. This is a situation that can cause problems in service contexts (Morales *et al.*, 1999; John-Baptiste *et al.*, 2004; Jacobs *et al.*, 2006).

While many everyday interactions between consumers and companies do not necessarily require much communication, the lack of a common language could become a problem the more interactive the context gets; this is especially the case within services. Service encounters involve both consumers and personnel taking an active part (Surprenant and Solomon 1987; Bitner 1990; Grönroos 2000). If the consumer and the company lack a common language in which both can interact at full ease – even if communication is still possible to some degree – this could have implications for the consumer's perception of the service. Furthermore, in a situation in which a consumer can decide between different service providers, this may influence the decision in case one provider can offer the services in the consumer's native language. This might open up possibilities for service companies using more than one language to gain a price premium; it has been pointed out within the field of service quality that consumers bonding with the company may indicate this by being prepared to pay a price premium (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman 1996). While there have been cases put forward for using more than one language on the market, it has not been tested whether language matters to the consumers to the extent that they are prepared to pay significantly more for being served in their native language than in some other language that they master.

During the last years, researchers have pointed out the importance of the consumer as a co-creator of value during service interactions with the company (Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Vargo and Lusch 2004; Grönroos 2008; Payne, Storbacka and Frow 2008). Common to this view is an emphasis on the interaction between the consumer and the company, as it is from this interaction that consumer value is taken to stem (Grönroos 2000; Vargo and Lusch 2004). In order for the customer to be able to participate in this process of co-creating value, it has been pointed out that he must have the competence it requires (Vargo and Lusch 2004). In case the consumer is not capable of interacting at full ease, it could be argued that an important component of this competence is missing. As the successful outcome of the interaction between the consumer and the company depends 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), the role of language, and consumer preferences for native language use, would appear to be important for the value co-creation process.

Building on this situation, this paper addresses the question of how language can influence the decisions of bilingual consumers in service contexts. Language and language skills have been shown to influence consumer behavior (Schmitt, Pan, and Tavassoli 1994; Tavassoli 1999; Luna and Peracchio, 2001), but most of this research has been focused on mass-communication. The question of how consumers behave in service situations presenting them with a choice between communicating in different languages has received little attention from a marketing or a service perspective. However, within the field of medical services, attention has been called to how communication in different languages might affect health care consumers (Morales *et al.* 1999; John-Baptiste *et al.*, 2004). Attention has also been drawn to the need for both more research and more practice into language and language skill aspects in contexts characterized by communication and language (Fernandez *et al.*, 2004; Jacobs *et al.*, 2006). The aim of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of native language use in service encounters. This is done with a focus on how consumers perceive the importance of speaking their native language in nine different service encounters.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Service Contexts***

A service context is taken to mean the service encounters between companies and consumers. The service context has been defined as “*the dyadic interaction between a customer and a service provider*” (Surprenant and Solomon 1987), emphasizing the active involvement of both parties in the service. Such encounters have been shown to influence consumer perceptions of service quality (Grönroos 1984; Bitner 1990; Bitner 1992). It has further been shown that a service context that potentially could cause pain (e.g. dentist visits) or a negative impact on appearance (e.g. hairdresser) is evaluated differently than contexts such as a restaurant visit (McDougal and Levesque, 2000), indicating that consumers take the impact the context could have on them into consideration when evaluating the service. A context that could have a large influence will matter more to the consumer. This displays similarities to the first two criteria for critical incidents, listed by Bitner, Booms and Tetreault (1990): an involvement of employee-customer interaction, and being either very satisfying or dissatisfying from the customer’s point of view. The difference is that in the contexts described by McDougal and Levesque, the customer views the interaction as potentially very important (author’s emphasis) rather than satisfying or dissatisfying.

It has usually been taken for granted that the company and the consumers share the same language, and researches have largely ignored the role that language plays in communication between business partners who do not share the same native language (Visser 1997, Clarke 2000, Marcella and Davies 2004). Highlighting the problems this may cause in the communication between companies and consumers as well as the lack of research into this situation, Marcella and Davies (2004) argue that language is relevant to each of the four aspects of communication as introduced by Schramm (1955) and present the following marketing situations in which the lack of a common native language is likely to cause problems

1. the *communicator’s* native *language* complemented by foreign language capability;
2. the *message* encoded in a particular *language*;

3. spoken and written *language* present in the *channels* of communication
  4. the *receiver's* native *language* and foreign language capability
- (Marcella and Davies 2004)

How service encounters that are perceived to be important from a customer's point of view are influenced by the fact that the customer and the company lack a common language in which both are comfortable has not been researched within marketing. Within hospitals – a service context of perceived importance for many consumers – it has been shown that Spanish-speaking patients in California perceive a higher quality if their doctor can speak with them in their native language (Morales et al. 1999; Fernandez et al., 2004) Thus, there appears to be a language influence in at least some service contexts, causing the consumer to prefer being served in his native language, even when able to speak the language of the service provider as a second language. To date, no research exists regarding the question of precisely if or how language could influence the service encounter. Given that language is seen as important and influencing the quality that consumers perceive, this could have implications for how willing consumers are to patronize a company using/not using their native language. As consumers have been shown to express their preferences of companies in the price they are prepared to pay (Zeithaml et al. 1996), this may have implications for consumers' patronage of a company. Consumers faced with a situation in which two similar companies are competing but only one by using the consumer's native language could express their preference by demanding a reduced price in order to consider the company not using their native language.

**H1:** In a market situation where at least one service provider on the market employs an additional language, consumers speaking that language will demand a price reduction for conducting this service in another language than their native language.

### ***Communication and the Service Context***

The importance of good communication in the service encounter has been demonstrated by many researchers (Stiles 1985; Bitner *et al.* 1990; Mattson and den Haring 1998). Although this is the case in all kinds of services, it has been shown that the consumer interaction with the company matters more in some kinds of services (Bitner, Faranda, Hubbert and Zeithaml 1997). Bitner, Faranda, Hubbert and Zeithaml divide different service contexts according to customer participation into low, moderate and high contexts, a scale that takes into account the customer's participation and thus also the amount of communication between the customer and the service personnel (*ibid.*) Research into how communication influences consumer behavior has shown that it influences both how consumers perceive the service they get as well as their behavior; a negative perception of communication might lead to irritation that in turn might lead to avoidance behavior. (Li, Edwards, and Lee 2002; Heinonen and Strandvik 2005). Despite this, the impact of language and understanding in the communication between consumers and service personnel, and its impact on consumer behavior has not received the same amount of attention. The fact that the consumers speak more than one language, and thus may be able to communicate with the company in another language than their strongest one, might not always be enough for them to consider the company. Even bilinguals with a very high degree of language

competence have been demonstrated to show a greater ease in their strongest language (La Heij, Hooglander, Kerling and van der Helden 1996; Luna and Peracchio, 2001; Luna and Peracchio, 2005). Given this fact, and given the important role of communication in service encounters, the capability of being able to communicate in one's stronger language could be expected to influence the behavior of bilingual consumers, especially in service contexts where communication is perceived to be important.

### *The Role of Language and Language Skills*

Little research exists on the role of language and linguistic concepts in understanding consumer behavior; the existing marketing research on language has been carried out without a service perspective. This includes research into implications for how language differences affect consumers' cognitive processing (Hastie and Park 1986; Schmitt, Pan, and Tavassoli 1994; Tavassoli and Han, 2001), leading to calls to include language aspects into models of consumer behavior (Schmitt and Zhang 1998). Decision making in everyday contexts such as shopping has been studied for speakers of different languages. (Michon and Chebat, 2004; Laroche, Teng, Michon and Chebat, 2005). Consumer behavior has also been shown to differ between different language groups, as in the case of English and French Canadians (Hui, Joy, Kim and Laroche 1993 Laroche *et al.*, 2000). Outside the field of business studies, attention has been called to the role of languages in service contexts where communication is of great importance, as is the case within the field of health care (Morales *et al.* 1999; Fernandez *et al.*, 2004; Jacobs *et al.*, 2006). Research into bilingualism has shown that even bilinguals with a high degree of proficiency in their second language still have greater difficulties to access concepts in that language (La Heij *et al.* 1996); the same results have been found for bilingualism in consumer behavior (Luna and Peracchio 2001). Nonetheless, a fluent bilingual would probably still be better equipped to communicate with the service personnel in his second language than a hesitant second language speaker would be. This fact could be likely to influence how bilingual consumers behave in service contexts in which they perceive communication to be important.

**H2:** The better the consumer speaks the second language of the market, the less important will native language use be to him when selecting between service providers.

### ***Bilingualism***

In order for the question of whether a consumer will choose one language over the other to be meaningful, the consumer faced with the choice will have to be bilingual to some extent. A person not being able to utter or comprehend a single sentence in another language would not be able to involve himself in a service in this language. Bilingualism has been defined in different ways, with as many as 27 definitions (Wei 2000), ranging from only persons brought up with native competence in both languages to all persons with at least a basic knowledge of a second language (cf. Baetens Beardsmore 1982; Baker and Prys Jones 1998; Wei 2000). The question about who is a bilingual has been answered by many diverging definitions. To narrow the concept down, bilingualism has been defined as a combination of different components, including the degree to which a person is skilled in his native language

(L1) as well as his second language (L2), or the contexts in which he uses the languages (Mackey 1962). To what degree an individual can be equally competent in more than one language, and to what degree second language learners are able to fully acquire new languages, are matters of much debate within the field of psycholinguistics (Obler and Zatorre, 2000). The definition of a bilingual as used in this paper is defined by Wei (2000) as a *functional bilingual* [someone who can operate in two languages with or without full fluency for the task at hand]. These bilinguals are further divided into two groups, using Wei's definition of a *maximal bilingual* [someone with near native control of two or more languages] as covering persons within the highest reaches of bilingualism (ibid. pp 6-7). A somewhat lower level of bilingualism is defined as a *dominant bilingual* [someone with greater proficiency in one of his or her languages and uses it significantly more than the other language(s)] (ibid. pp 6-7). The reason for focusing on functional bilingualism in this paper is that the focus is on how consumers perceive using their native language or another language in service encounters. It is thus the functional aspect of language use, being able to interact rather than being fully fluent, that is studied.

## STUDY

### Pre-study

A pre-study was conducted by interviewing consumers in a bilingual market, Finland, with the purpose of identifying service encounters that were seen as either very important or not important in terms of native language use. Finland is an officially bilingual country with Finnish and Swedish being the official and equal languages. The respondents came from different parts of Finland and were all native speakers of Swedish but with a considerable variance in their self-reported skills in Finnish, ranging from full bilinguals raised with both languages and living their lives mainly in Finnish to respondents reporting being considerably less at ease when speaking Finnish and not using it actively in everyday life. The respondents were between 20 and 30 years at the time of the interviews and were evenly divided between females and males.

A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for the pre-study in order to find out not only in which contexts a language was used, but also the reasons offered by the respondents for making their choices. In order to achieve as reliable results as possible, the respondents were asked to describe real situations that they had encountered. Instead of focusing on hypothetical situations, the answers regarding the language influence on the consumers in different service contexts are based on actual examples provided by the respondents as contexts in which they were already using either their first or their second language. Echoing earlier findings on even very fluent bilinguals (La Heij *et al.* 1996; Luna and Peracchio, 2001), even those respondents who are fluent in both languages and have grown up speaking both languages with their parents still showed a preference towards their stronger language in a few services contexts. These contexts were the same for all the respondents, and are characterized by a high personal and/or monetary value and a high degree of interaction between the consumer and the company. This reflects research showing that contexts with a potentially high impact are viewed differently by consumers (McDougal and Levesque, 2000). It is also in line with earlier research into how communication quality and satisfaction in health care services is affected by language (Morales *et al.* 1999; Jacobs *et al.*, 2006). The following points represent a brief summary of the three different kinds of service contexts found in the pre-study.

- i. **Everyday contexts with no special vocabulary.** All respondents reported making regular use of their second language. Some thought it was nice to be able to use their native language but it was not something they reported as having an impact on their choice of providers. Services mentioned by the respondents included visiting a café or buying food.
- ii. **Everyday contexts with special vocabulary.** Some respondents reported selecting providers based on the possibility to use their native language. Only dominant bilinguals belonged to this group, no maximal bilingual reported having taken the possibility to speak their native language into consideration in these services. Services in this second group included having electric installations made or visiting the hairdresser
- iii. **Special contexts with potentially large impact.** All respondents reported a preference for using their native language, many reporting that the choice of their current bank, insurance company or health care provider had been influenced by the possibility to use their native language in contact with the company. Often mentioned services were medical visits or bank negotiations.

The three different kinds of contexts identified in the pre-study correspond closely to the three levels of customer participation identified by Bitner *et al.* (1997). The everyday contexts with no special vocabulary are typically contexts with low customer participation, the everyday contexts with a special vocabulary correspond to the moderate level of customer participation while the special contexts with a potentially large impact echo the high level of customer participation (cf *ibid.*) This close correspondence is not very surprising, as increased customer participation in the service almost by definition will include increased communication between the two involved parties. Increased communication will in turn strengthen the perceived importance of language in precisely these contexts. While Bitner *et al.* deal with consumer participation, the findings are close to consumer involvement; the former emphasizing the consumer's actions while the latter emphasizes the consumer's cognition. Consumer involvement thus concerns the cognitive process of the consumer, influencing his behavior (Simon 1967, Houston and Rothschild 1978, Bettman 1979, Broderick, Mueller and Greenley 2006). Involvement would thus appear to be dependent on the consumer's perception of the situation (Celsi and Olson 1988) While involvement has sometimes been divided into only high involvement and low involvement (Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann 1983), it is here divided into high involvement, middle involvement and low involvement. This mirrors both the customer participation levels used by Bitner *et al.* (1997) and the pre-study in which the interviewees usually made such a distinction. When discussing their native language use in service contexts, the respondents distinguished between contexts in which language was very important, and contexts in which language was not seen as important at all, but the respondents also took care to point out many service contexts falling between the two. It would thus appear that consumers pay particular attention to language in service contexts in which they are not familiar with the terminology and/or feel that the outcome is of particular importance. Both of these requires an additional cognitive element, leading to higher consumer involvement (Simon 1967, Bettman 1979). Involvement would thus appear to be closely linked to the perceived importance of native language use.

- H3a:** Consumers will perceive native language use to be important in service encounters with a high level of involvement and a special vocabulary.
- H3b:** The importance of language in service encounters with a special vocabulary but of a more everyday kind and less extensive consumer involvement will be moderate.
- H3c:** Native language use will be perceived to be of low importance in everyday service encounters with no special vocabulary and limited consumer involvement.

## **Design and Measures**

The main study was conducted in the Canadian city of Montréal in the province of Québec. Montréal was viewed as a suitable research area with both a large French speaking population, 2,275,035 individuals in the Montréal Census Metropolitan area, and a large English speaking population, 408,185 individuals in the same area. (Canadian Census, 2001). Native French-speakers make up a provincial majority of 81% and a national minority of 23% while native English speakers make up a national majority of 59% and a provincial minority of 8%. There is thus a situation in which both communities can be viewed, and often view themselves, both as a majority and a minority. Bilingualism in Montréal is relatively widespread with over 50% of the population being able to speak both official languages (ibid.)

Based on the results of the pre-study, a questionnaire was designed to test the importance of speaking one's native language in different service contexts. For the questionnaire, it was decided to use scenarios involving match choice. In each scenario, a service context was described to the consumer who could choose from a service provider using his native language or a service provider using the other language of the market. The price for the service in the consumer's native language was given, and he was then asked to give the price at which he would consider the service in the second language to be of better value to him. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of Likert-scales from 1-9, asking the consumers to rate the perceived importance of using their native language in the nine types of service contexts found in the questionnaire and, finally, to rate their knowledge of French and English respectively.

A first version of the questionnaire, consisting of twelve scenarios, was deemed as requiring too much time for the study, and the questionnaire was scaled down to nine scenarios. Seven of these nine scenarios were based on contexts explicitly mentioned in the pre-study as being either very important or not important at all and in which respondents had reported being either highly involved or hardly involved at all. These former contexts were: banking, insurance, medical visit, electric installations (all of them important) while the latter were buying food and going to a café (not important). In addition, the service context of visiting a hairdresser was falling between these two, with only one respondent reported feeling highly involved in that service.

Reviewing these scenarios, it seemed that the scenarios requiring more involvement were also more expensive. In order to be able to distinguish the influence of price from the influence of involvement, two scenarios were added: buying an expensive etching



and buying a holiday on-line. Although the price of the service would place it outside the everyday contexts, it is still no difference from a language perspective than a simple transaction just like buying food or a coffee, albeit at a much higher price. The latter scenario of buying a holiday involved a situation in which no oral communication was needed, just a passive knowledge of the language but with a vocabulary outside the everyday contexts. The questionnaire was thus made up of three high-involvement services with a specialized vocabulary (banking, medical visit and insurance), three low-involvement that required little communication (café, grocery store, etching) and three middle-involvement services that would require both some consumer interaction and some special vocabulary, but without the same potential impact (cf McDougal and Levesque 2000) on the consumer (holiday purchase, hairdresser and electrical installations in the house).

For the match choice scenarios, it was decided to ask for the consumers' willingness to pay between the two languages. The reason for this choice was to present the respondents with an overarching choice that was easily explained and understood, in order to achieve as reliable results as possible. Choosing willingness to pay is not intended to find a general level for prices in different services, just to make the choices more tangible. Although the prices in the scenarios were picked to be realistic, no conclusions can be made about the general price consumers are willing to pay for a given service – apart from the difference caused by language. Thus, any consideration of prices in services outside the scope of language is also outside the scope of this article.

The questionnaire was pre-tested both in Finland and in Québec, and adjusted accordingly to the comments received. The questionnaire was then translated, and back translation was used to ensure the questionnaire being correct. Finally, Francophone and Anglophone Quebecers read through the final version to check for possible cultural factors that could have biased the results.

### ***Sample***

The questionnaire was distributed to undergraduate students at an Anglophone and at a Francophone university in Montréal. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed, resulting in 248 returned and usable questionnaires representing a return ratio of 82.7%. The questionnaire was bilingual with English on one side and French on the other, and the respondents were asked to fill it in according to their native language. Of the 248 respondents, 108 reported French as their native language and 86 reported English. The somewhat higher number of Francophone respondents is due to more Francophones studying in Anglophone universities than vice-versa. 54 respondents reported being Allophones, native speakers of another language than the two official languages of Canada; a total of 22 such languages were reported and the allophone respondents were roughly equally divided between using English or French as their main community language. The self-reported bilingualism of the respondents corresponds well to the assumption that consumers on this market possesses bilingualism, at least to the lower degree defined by Wei (2000) – only three out of 248 respondents reported having no knowledge in the other language of the market. On the Likert scale from 1 (no knowledge) to 9 (full fluency), Francophone respondents reported an average fluency of 6.55 in English while Anglophones reported a fluency of 6.86 in French. Bilingualism of all degrees being well represented in the sample, it was well suited for the research.

Given the relatively high proportions of respondents being native speakers of neither English nor French – a representative phenomenon of the population in Montréal – it is valid to ask whether these respondents may have influenced the results. For this reason, all the hypothesis were tested using only native speakers of English and French, and none of the results differed significantly in any of the hypotheses. The hypotheses were also tested both with and without the respondents who refused to pay anything at all if not being served in their native language to reduce a potential ideological influence on the answers. Again, the outcome of the hypotheses were the same

Using undergraduate students as respondents was a convenience sample, providing relatively easy access to respondents. Limiting the sample to undergraduates, however, also eliminated some external variation. Sociolinguistic studies on Québec have found that factors such as age, education and income level tend to influence Quebecers in terms of language and language use. By using a homogenous sample, the risk of having the data influenced by such external factors was reduced. On the other hand, the results of this demographic group may differ from society as a whole. Bilingualism is more widespread among younger persons in Montréal, meaning that the influence of language could be smaller than in the population as a whole.

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents the original price in Canadian dollars for conducting the service in the consumer's native language, the mean price to which a service provider using the consumer's second language would have to lower its price for the consumer to consider it, as well as the standard deviation and sample size for each scenario.

**Table 1 Results of the nine service scenarios**

	<b>Café visit</b>	<b>Bank loan</b>	<b>Condo insurance</b>	<b>Hair-dresser</b>	<b>Medical visit</b>
<u>Original price</u> in the consumer's native language	3.50	350.00	1400.00	40.00	180.00
<u>Mean price</u> for switching to a service provider not using the consumer's language	2.75	267.88	1092.77	28.27	115.31
SD	0.95	100.17	361.48	12.95	68.37
<i>n</i>	243	240	243	244	240

	<b>Buying holiday on-line</b>	<b>Electric installations</b>	<b>Grocery store</b>	<b>Etching in gallery</b>
<u>Original price</u> in the consumer's native language	2500.00	320.00	50.00	12000.00
<u>Mean price</u> for switching to a service provider not using the consumer's language	2205.78	269.45	42.87	11033.80
SD	459.08	74.74	11.67	1965.56
<i>n</i>	244	246	246	232

Hypothesis 1 suggested that consumers would demand a price reduction in order for them to consider a changing to service provider using their second language from a similar service provider using their native language. The results of the questionnaire support this suggestion. A significant difference could be verified between the original price for the service and the mean price within each of the nine scenarios ( $z = 7.49, p < 0.01$ ). Hypothesis 1 was thus accepted.

**Table 2 Perceived importance of native language use in the service contexts**

	<b>Café visit</b>	<b>Bank loan</b>	<b>Condo insurance</b>	<b>Hairdresser</b>	<b>Medical visit</b>
Mean	2.37	7.68	6.58	4.28	7.45
SD	2.01	2.20	2.34	2.88	2.39
<i>n</i>	244	244	243	243	243

	<b>Buying holiday on-line</b>	<b>Electric installations</b>	<b>Grocery store</b>	<b>Etching in gallery</b>
Mean	4.57	5.26	2.55	3.73
SD	2.71	2.59	2.05	2.33
<i>n</i>	243	243	243	243

*Measured on a scale ranging from 1 (not important at all) to 9 (Extremely important)*

Hypothesis 2 assumed that there would be a significant correlation between how well the consumers speak the second language of the market and the importance they attach to speaking their native language in service encounters. The perceived importance of using one's native language in the different services are given in Table 2. Hypothesis 2 further assumed that the correlation would be negative, thus lower language skills in the second language would lead the consumers to regard it as more important to be able to use their native language than would consumers with higher language skills. A regression analysis for second language skills and the importance attached to speaking one's native language is found in Table 3. The correlation coefficient<sup>7</sup> is indeed negative for all scenarios, as was expected, but the correlation is only of medium strength in two scenarios and weak in the remaining seven scenarios. Not finding a single strong correlation, hypothesis 2 was rejected.

<sup>7</sup> The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was employed.

**Table 3 Correlations for perceived importance of native language use and language skills in second language**

		Language skills in second language
Perceived importance of native language use	Café visit	-0.060
	Bank loan	-0.329 **
	Condo insurance	-0.275 **
	Hairdresser	-0.236 **
	Medical visit	-0.323 **
	Buying holiday on-line	-0.226 **
	Electric installations	-0.230 **
	Grocery store	-0.090
	Buying an etching	-0.133 *

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed)

Hypotheses 3a, 3b and 3c assumed that using one's native language in high involvement services would be perceived to be very important, that the perceived importance in low involvement services would be rather low and that the middle involvement services would be found around the middle of the scale. To test this, a t-test was first performed for the nine service contexts. As the Likert-scale used in the questionnaire ran from 1 to 9, the interval between 4 and 6 constitute the middle of the scale, representing neither a very high nor a very low perceived important. For the high involvement scenarios, it was tested whether they are significantly above 6, while the low involvement scenarios were tested for being significantly below 4. The medium involvement scenarios were supposed to fall within the interval of 4 to 6.

The results of the t-test showed highly significant scores both for high involvement services being above the average and low involvement services being below it. ( $p < 0.01$ ). As the sample is relatively big, however, even small variances could turn out to be significant. Thus it was decided to further use Hotelling's t-square test in order to be able to test whether the three groups of services differed from the average score as a group.

Hypothesis 3a assumed that consumers would consider high involvement services with a special vocabulary and a potentially large impact as services in which native language use would be important. The results for the three services of this kind in the study, banking, insurance and medical visits, are displayed in Table 4a. The t-tests for these three high involvement scenarios showed the perceived importance of speaking one's native language to be significantly larger than 6 in each scenario. Hotelling's t-square test further showed that perceived importance of the group with these three services contexts is significantly above 6 on the Likert scale,  $F(3, 238) = 60.49$ ;  $p = 0.001$ . Hypothesis 3a was thus accepted.

**Table 4a Results of t-tests and Hotelling's t-square test for the means of the service contexts being larger than 6 in high involvement services**

Scenario	N	x	s	t	F	p
Bank	241	7.68	2.21	11.78	60.49	0.001
Doctor	241	7.44	2.39	9.32		
Insurance	241	6.61	2.34	4.01		

Hypothesis 3b suggested that the importance of native language use in services with a special vocabulary but with a less extensive consumer involvement and of a more everyday kind would be perceived to be of moderate importance, i.e. neither a very high nor low perceived importance of native language use. The results for the three medium involvement services of having one's hair cut, buying a holiday on-line and having electrical installations in the apartment all fall within the range of 4 to 6, as presented in Table 4b. The t-tests showed that both buying a holiday on-line and having electrical installations done scored significantly higher than 4 and lower than 6 on the perceived importance of language. Visiting the hairdresser scored significantly lower than 6 and scored higher than 4, although not significantly so. Hotelling's t-square test, however, did show that the perceived importance of language in the group of middle-involvement service contexts was significantly higher than 4 ( $F(3, 238) = 20.78$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ) and significantly lower than 6 on the Likert scale ( $F(3, 238) = 41.33$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ). Hypothesis 3b was accepted.

**Table 4b Results of t-tests and Hotelling's t-square test for the means of the service contexts being within 4-6 for middle involvement services**

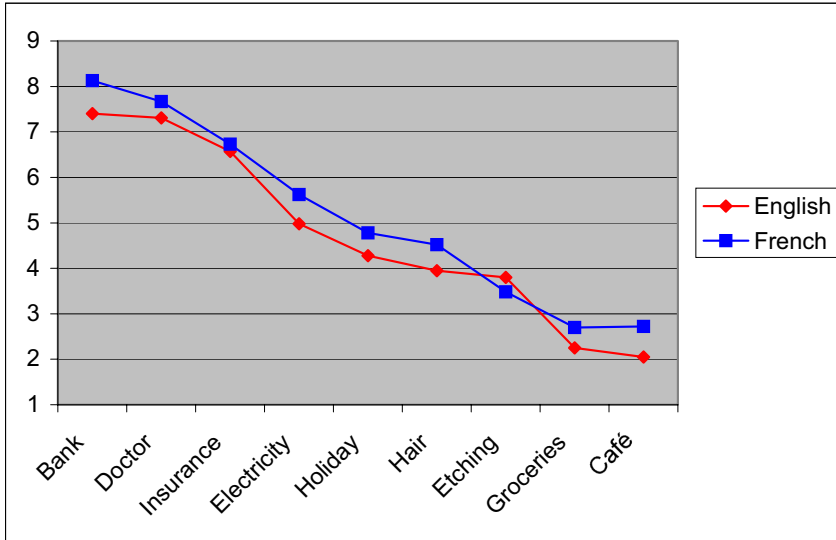
Scenario	N	x	s	t	F	p	t	F	p
				<i>For x &gt; 4</i>			<i>For x &lt; 6</i>		
Electricity	241	5.30	2.60	7.764	20.78	0.001	-4.129	41.33	0.001
Holiday	241	4.56	2.71	3.184			-8.270		
Hairdresser	241	4.26	2.89	1.383			-9.367		

Hypothesis 3c proposed that the consumers would perceive a low importance of native language use in everyday service encounters with no special vocabulary and only limited consumer involvement. As outlined in Table 4c, the t-tests revealed this to be the case, with the low involvement service encounters of buying food, buying a coffee and buying a painting all scoring significantly lower than 4. Hotelling's t-square test further supported this view, with the group of three low involvement contexts being significantly lower.  $F(3, 238) = 56.50$ ;  $p = 0.001$ . Hypothesis 3c was accepted.

**Table 4c Results of t-tests and Hotelling's t-square test for the means of the service contexts being below 4 in low involvement services**

Scenario	N	x	s	t	F	p
Etching	241	3.69	2.32	-2.053	56.50	0.001
Food	241	2.54	2.05	-11.043		
Café	241	2.37	2.02	-12.519		

As the sample consisted of both Anglophone and Francophone respondents, the hypotheses were also tested for each group to check for possible differences. The outcome of the hypotheses for each language group turned out to be identical to the whole sample; hypotheses 1, 3a, 3b and 3c were supported while hypothesis 2 was rejected. The allophones and the respondents reporting both English and French as equal native languages were not included in these tests. Looking at the Anglophone and Francophone samples, two trends were noticeable and can be seen from Figure 1.



**Figure 1 Perceived importance of native language use for Anglophones and Francophones**

It is noteworthy how close the two groups are, but also that Francophones perceived the importance of native language use in service encounters to be higher than did Anglophones in eight out of nine service encounters. As can be seen in Table 5, the differences were generally small and the higher Francophone preference for native language use is significant only in two of the service encounters, bank negotiations and a café visit.

**Table 5 Perceived importance of native language use in the language groups**

Service context	Language group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Bank	Anglophone	83	7.40	2.37
	Francophone	104	8.13 *	1.82
Doctor	Anglophone	83	7.31	2.56
	Francophone	104	7.67	2.08
Insurance	Anglophone	83	6.57	2.44
	Francophone	104	6.73	2.11
Electricity	Anglophone	83	4.98	2.64
	Francophone	104	5.62	2.45
Holiday	Anglophone	83	4.28	2.73
	Francophone	104	4.78	2.67
Hairdresser	Anglophone	83	3.95	2.93
	Francophone	104	4.53	2.78
Etching	Anglophone	83	3.80	2.56
	Francophone	104	3.48	2.18
Grocery store	Anglophone	83	2.25	1.85
	Francophone	104	2.70	2.17
Café	Anglophone	83	2.05	1.95
	Francophone	104	2.72 *	2.13

\* The difference between the groups is significant (0.05 level)

## DISCUSSION

Based on the interviews made in the pre-study and the review of the literature into characteristics of service encounters, it was expected that service contexts would be especially prone to a certain language influence due to the importance of communication in services. This was also found to be the case. In all the nine scenarios of the questionnaire, the respondents demanded a price reduction to take part in the service context in the other language as compared to conducting the service in their native language. The average price reduction for all respondents ranged from 7% (buying an expensive etching) to 38% (medical visit). In general, Francophones required a larger reduction than Anglophones to consider a service provider not using their native language.

That language matters in service encounters, even in contexts with a relatively low need for communication, could thus be verified throughout the results. Given the existing literature into the importance of good communication within services, and keeping in mind that even the most fluent second language speakers are still more at ease in their native language, it was not particularly surprising to find a significant language influence. However, finding the need for average price reductions in excess of 20% for more than half of the services was somewhat less expected and testifies to the importance played by language, at least in the market where the research was carried out.

As can be seen in table 1, the standard deviations are high in all nine service contexts, revealing a high degree of variation in how consumers responded to the scenarios. In each scenario, there were always consumers who were indifferent to changing language and, at the other end of the specter, consumers who refused to pay anything at all if not able to speak their native language. This was found to be the case both among Francophones and Anglophones. Especially in services such as a medical visit, a discussion with the bank or with an insurance company and also at the hairdresser's, a large number of consumers either outright refused to take part in the service in another language than their own or required a substantial price-reduction to do so. This corresponded well to the importance these services had been given in the pre-study. It also corresponds to research showing that ethnocentric consumers may be rather indifferent to the ethnicity of the service personnel in low involvement services but put more emphasis on being served by someone belonging to the same group as themselves in high involvement contexts (Ouellet 2007). It is further noticeable that these four services are the services requiring most communication between the consumer and the service personnel. However, it should be kept in mind that this influence was found in all kinds of services, even those that required little or no communication.

A more surprising finding was the almost complete lack of correlation between second language skills and the price the consumer was prepared to pay. It was expected to be found that the better the consumer speaks the second language of the market, the more ready he would be to use that language in service contexts. Instead, the actual picture was almost total disarray. Although there were consumers who spoke the second language perfectly and thus motivated their indifference to using the one or the other, there were also a good deal of consumers who reported full fluency (9 on the Likert scale) in the second language and still demanded extensive price reduction in order to consider switching to a service provider using that language. Similarly but inversely, although there were consumers who reported being clearly less at ease in the second language and thus wanted a substantial price reduction, there was also a large group of consumers who demanded little or no price reductions to conduct the service in their second language although speaking it considerably less well. This gave rise to a situation in which the correlation coefficient between skills in the second language and the price for the conducting the service in that language was only 0.34 for medical visits and even less for all the other service contexts.

The pre-study had suggested that the two financial service contexts of banking and insurance would be of special importance to the consumers when it comes to native language use, alongside medical services. This was supported by the questionnaire, in which precisely these three services were rated as being significantly more important than the remaining six services, something on which Anglophones and Francophones agreed. Both these services are characterized by the outcome having a potentially large impact on the consumer, a specialized vocabulary and a need for the consumer to engage and communicate with the service personnel.

Comparing the importance that consumers attach to speaking their native language in different services and the price reduction they demand for not being able to do so, two things are noticeable. As could be expected, all the services that are perceived as very important also yield considerable demanded reductions. However, the opposite is not true. Not all the services yielding a high demanded reduction are seen as important. Especially the service of visiting a hairdresser distorts the overall pattern. Already the pre-study and literature review had called attention to the service of a haircut, due to its impact on appearance. When asked to rate the importance of speaking one's native language with the hairdresser, the respondents gave it a rather low score, in fact being



below the average and indicating that it was not of any importance to them. In sharp contrast, it yielded the second highest demanded price reduction when the respondents estimated the value of speaking one language or the other in the service encounter. Thus, a higher percentual reduction was required for this service than for the two financial services with their much higher perceived importance. This difference between the perceived importance of some services and the willingness to pay may seem contradictory, and would merit further research. A plausible explanation was offered by some respondents when interviewed about the results after the analysis of the questionnaires. According to the respondents, a consumer can always count on being able to speak his native language in a bank or in a major insurance company in Montréal; these institutions always have bilingual staff. In the case of hairdressers, this is not always the case. Thus the consumer still perceives the bank to be more important than the hairdresser on a general level, but knows that in Montréal, there's a real possibility of not being able to speak one's native language with the hairdresser while no such risk exists in a bank or an insurance company. This knowledge may influence his evaluation of the scenarios. The sociolinguistic setting of the market could thus be seen to have an influence not only on the responses of the consumers, but even on their evaluation of the questions. The fact that many consumers actively converse with their hairdresser in a manner that probably would be absent from the other service encounters in the study may also offer a possible explanation. With the exception of the hairdresser, however, the results of the demanded reductions and the perceived importance do correspond to each other.

## Conclusions

This paper addressed the issue of whether language influences consumers in service encounters, finding a significant influence in all kinds of service contexts. The general consumer prefers being served in his native language to the extent that he will require a large discount before switching from a company using his native language to a competitor not doing so. That being served in one's native language is having an impact is perhaps not surprising, even though the very strong impact found in the data exceeded even that expressed in the interviews for the pre-study. Given the lack of attention paid to situations in which the consumer and the service provider do not share the same language, it is interesting to note the strength of native language preference among consumers.

More surprising is the almost complete lack of correlation between second-language skills and being prepared to engage in the service in the second-language. Based on the interviews for the pre-study, it was thought that the better the consumer speaks the second language of the market, the less will the language matter for him. This turned out not to be the case; thus the language skills of the consumer does not necessarily predict what language the consumer will opt for and whether he would be willing to pay more to be served in his native language.

The results contribute to the understanding of language influence on consumer behavior within services where good communication is perceived to be important. As many researchers have shown, language can have an impact on consumers (Schmitt, Pan and Tavassoli 1994; Morales *et al.* 1999; Tavassoli and Han 2001). This paper addressed the research gap of whether language can influence consumer behavior in services. It found an impact in all contexts, an impact that further grew in given contexts characterized by factors perceived to be important, such as health, appearance or personal finances.

Experiences from hospitals have already called attention to the effect of language competence in health care (Morales *et al.* 1999; John-Baptiste *et al.*, 2004; Fernandez *et al.*, 2004). The results in this paper conformed to that view and could add that there indeed seems to be a language influence in a much wider range of services. Apart from the medical services already addressed, two other industries in particular were mentioned as important: those of banking and insurance. Like health care, these two branches are characterized by a specialized vocabulary and a potential to have a large impact on consumers' life.

### **Managerial implications**

For companies, the findings carry potentially wide-ranging implications: consumers prefer to be served in their native language, and, if in a position to choose between companies, they may require quite a large discount to consider a service provider not serving them in their native language. There are a large number of officially bilingual capitals and metropolises in America and Europe – Barcelona, Bern, Brussels, Helsinki, Kyiv, Los Angeles, Montréal, Miami, New York and Ottawa to name but a few. Belgium, Canada, Finland and Switzerland are officially bilingual countries while populous regions such as Alsace in France, the Basque Country in Spain and France, Catalonia in Spain and France, South Tyrol in Italy, Transylvania in Romania and Wales in the UK add to the plethora of markets with more than one language being present. The existence of close to 50 millions native speakers of a minority language in the European Union is having implications for companies operating in any of these countries, regions or cities. In addition, European countries, alongside Canada and the US, have received many millions of immigrants during the last decades, a factor that also increases the existence of potential customers speaking another native language than the main language of the market – something that in turn further enhances the potential of multilingualism in services. If a significant portion of these consumers would be influenced by language to the extent that they would require large discounts when being served in their native language – as is the case in the market of Québec – it opens up possibilities for service companies to position themselves within segments that to a large extent have received little attention.

However, care should be taken when considering the data; two things in particular should be kept in mind by managers when reviewing a bilingual market. The consumers are heterogeneous and, based on the present research, there will always be consumers for whom the language is of very little importance. Thus, operating in a second language is never likely to appeal strongly to *all* the consumers speaking that language. Secondly, it would be a mistake to think that speakers of the second language on the market already speak the first language so well that they are just as happy doing business in it. No significant link was found between language skills in the second language and willingness to do business in it. In short, whenever there is a bilingual market, there is a potential to capture consumers by using their language, but the potential consumer segment will not necessarily equal the demographic segment.

### **Further research**

As the number of bilinguals and bilingual contacts between consumers and companies continue to grow, the impact that language and language skills have on consumers and their decision-making is in need of further research. Reproducing the research presented in this paper on another market would be needed in order to see the extent to

which the results can be generalized. While this study found differences between services in terms of the importance consumers attach to speaking their native language, a more specialized questionnaire could also be designed to test just one type on contexts, e.g. different everyday contexts or different specialized contexts. Based on the results of this study, differences would still exist within these groups but to a less significant degree than in the present study. Finding the differences between various language groups in terms of attached importance to speaking their native language would present a more detailed view of the market.

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## Language Choices in Services

### The Influence of Gender on Language Use in Service Encounters

#### **Abstract**

**Gender has been shown to influence consumers both in service situations and in language use, but no research has combined these two issues. As markets are getting more and more diverse and people from different cultures are living together, the importance of understanding consumers' language use preferences in services is emerging. This paper addresses the importance of more research into how native language use influences consumers, outlining why language is especially important within service contexts. Building on research showing that female and male consumers differ in how they perceived service encounters, the papers suggest that there will be a gender difference within language use in services. A study conducted in Canada and in Finland demonstrates both some noteworthy differences and some similarities between females and male consumers in terms of language use in services.**

## Introduction

In a world with Internet, a global economy and international cooperation in a range of fields, international interactions are increasing with more people spending time in countries other than their own and learning languages other than their own. The same development means that more and more consumers are interacting with companies in another language than their native language. Globally, researchers have suggested that around 50% of the consumers in the world are speaking more than one language (Luna and Peracchio 2001). Reflecting this new situation, marketers have started to pay attention to how consumers are influenced by language (Schmitt and Pan 1994, Lass and Hart 2004, Tavassoli and Han 2001, Luna and Peracchio 2005). Despite this increase in research into language within marketing in general, language influence in service encounters has long been a relatively neglected area of service research. This is all the more surprising, as service encounters are characterised by interactions in which both the consumer and the service personnel are taking an active part (Eiglier and Langeard 1976, Surprenant and Solomon 1987), and the need for good communication is thus crucial to the outcome of the service encounter (Bitner 1990; Grönroos 1982). If the service personnel and the consumers do not share a common native language, situations may arise in which the communication suffers. Both the absence of a common language in which both parties can communicate comfortably, and possible misunderstandings resulting from cultural differences, may have implication for how the consumer perceives the quality of the service (Jacobs, Chen, Karliner, Agger-Gupta, and Mutha, 2006; Morales, Cunningham, Brown, Liu, and Hays 1999). In a situation where the consumer has got the option of choosing between different service providers, his decision might be influenced by whether one of the service providers can serve him in his native language. It has been noted that language influence on consumers is an area in need of research (Schmitt and Zhang 1998).

Introducing gender as a relevant characteristic of language influence in service encounters builds on the fact that gender has been shown to be one of the most consistent differentiating characteristics of language use (Labov 1966, Trudgill 1983, Kerswill 2003). In recent years, gender differences have begun to receive increased interest within marketing and service encounters as well (cf. Dholakia 1999; Bakewell and Mitchell, 2003; Fisher and Dubé 2005). Researchers have been able to show that female and male consumers behave in different ways in service encounters, a difference that often is manifested by female consumers paying more attention to various aspects of the service than male consumers do (Falk and Campbell 1997; Dholakia 1999; Forseth 2005) or reacting to other aspects of the service than males do (Voss and Cova 2006). This clear tendency of female consumers being more attentive than male consumers is mirrored very closely by findings within the field of sociolinguistics, describing language use. Numerous studies have found that females consistently pay more attention to using a more “correct<sup>8</sup>” form of language (Trudgill 1983, Kerswill 2003, Watt 2002). This paper addresses one aspect of language influence in service encounters by analysing differences in how female and male consumers perceive language use in services. Based on these similar findings of earlier research, the paper suggests that female and male consumers may be likely to perceive language differently in service encounters, with female consumers finding language to be more important.

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<sup>8</sup> Correct language is here taken to mean a language form that corresponds more closely to that of the standard language form. No statement is made on the quality of language neither in the referenced sources nor in this paper.

## The Service Encounter

A service encounter has been defined as “the dyadic interaction between a customer and a service provider” (Surprenant and Solomon 1987), thus putting the emphasis on the active involvement of both parties in the service. Such interactional encounters have been shown to influence how consumers perceive service quality (Grönroos 1984; Bitner 1990; Bitner 1992). It has further been demonstrated that a service encounter that could have a large influence will matter more to the consumer. Encounters having a large perceived influence could be either critical incidents (Bitner et al. 1990) or services that could cause the consumer pain or a negative impact on the appearance (McDougal and Levesque, 2000). The interactional nature of the service encounter and the consequences it might carry make communication between the two parties involved in the service encounter all the more important. This importance of good communication in the service encounter has been demonstrated by many researchers (Stiles 1985; Bitner *et al.* 1990; Mattson and den Haring 1998). Research into communication has shown that it influences how consumers perceive the service they get as well as the consumer’s behaviour. A negative perception of communication might cause the consumer to experience irritation, something that in turn might result in avoidance behaviour at the part of the consumer. (Li *et al.*, 2002; Heinonen and Strandvik, 2005). Despite this, the question of how service encounters that are perceived to be important from a consumer’s point of view are influenced by the fact that the consumer and the company lack a common language in which both are comfortable has not been researched within marketing.

### *Language within the Service Encounter*

Although virtually no research exists on how language influences consumers in service encounters, some research in other fields have been made on related situations. Within the field of medicine, researches have been able to demonstrate that native Spanish-speaking patients in California perceive a higher quality if their doctor is able to speak with them in their native language; this has been shown to be true even when the patients are able to speak English. (Morales *et al.* 1999; Fernandez, Schillinger, Grumbach, Rosenthal, Stewart, Wang, and Pérez-Stable 2004). Such a hospital visit is a service encounter characterised both by a special vocabulary and by the consumer often having to take an active part in the service. Consumer participation is thus of importance to the outcome, and service encounters have been divided into low participation, medium participation and high participation depending on the degree to which the consumer participates in the service (Bitner, Faranda, Hubbert and Zeithaml 1997). As increased consumer participation in the service almost by definition will include increased communication between the two involved parties, it is likely that language will be of special importance in service encounters characterised by high consumer participation.

Apart from the high level of consumer participation, the language influence in service encounters such as a hospital visit might also be dependent on the large impact it could have on the consumer. Research on the nature of service encounters has shown that consumers regard service encounters with a potentially high impact on either their person or on their finances differently from how they perceive other kinds of service encounters (McDougal and Levesque 2000). A hospital visit is also a kind of service encounter in which the communication between the consumer (patient) and the service provider (doctor) is crucial; the consumer’s participation in the process is of high importance to the outcome. Other service encounters characterised both by high

consumer participation in the service encounter and by a large potential impact on the consumer could include different kinds of financial services.

Communication in the service encounter would thus be likely to be of special importance in service encounters characterised both by high consumer participation (Bitner et al 1997) and by the way consumers evaluate the outcome of the service encounter (McDougal and Levesque 2000). Increased communication would in turn be likely to strengthen the perceived importance of language in such encounters. As consumers pay particular attention to service encounters that may have a direct impact on their person or their finances, it would seem likely that consumers, males and females alike, will perceive language to be of special importance in these kinds of service encounter.

### *Gender in Service Encounters*

The use of gender as a relevant characteristic of language use in service encounters derives from the role that gender has been shown to play in language use in general. Looking at differences between females and males in terms of both language use and language attitudes, a large number of studies have concluded that females and males display significant and consistent differences in the way they use language (Labov 1966, Gal 1978, Kerswill 2003, Watt 2002). The large number of studies on this subject and the consistency in the results have led to the differences between gender in terms of language being called "*the single most consistent finding to emerge from sociolinguistic studies over the past 20 years.*" (Trudgill 1983).

On a general level, this difference between female and male language use consists of females being more language conscious in that they adopt a way of speaking that is closer to the standard language or to a language form perceived to be more prestigious. (Kerswill 2003) Among the differences found in studies on language and gender, women have consistently been characterised by factors usually associated with urban, more modern and more prestigious levels of the language; in short, women are usually closer to the standard language and quicker to adopt new language trends (Gal 1978, Gal 1979, Watt 2002). In contrast to this, males have been characterised by using language levels that are more closely connected with rural areas and / or a lower education. Men are thus more likely to hold on to dialects and slower than women to adopt new trends in language (Akselberg 2003, Trudgill 1983). These results have been confirmed by researches in many different societies, with the same gender difference being reported from very diverse cultures and social groups, ranging from upper class New York (Labov 1966) across rural England (Watt 2002) and Austria (Gal 1978) to Teheran (Jahangiri 1980). Although a large number of studies have resulted in the same results, it has been emphasised that they are only applicable on a general level (Trudgill 1983). On this general level, however, the overall pattern of females and males differing from each other in terms of language use and language attitudes is very strong.

The tendency of females being more attentive is not limited to language use. Research into gender differences in marketing have long acknowledged that female consumers are more involved, including paying more attention to messages and to consider them more thoroughly than male consumers do (Krugman 1966, Meyers-Levy 1989), as well as displaying greater sensitivity than males when forming judgements (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1991, Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991). More recent research support this view, with established. differences between female and male consumers' decision

making having been pointed out, particularly within shopping where female consumers take more time and engage to a larger extent, both mentally and more involved, in their decision making than male consumers (Falk and Campbell 1997; Dholakia 1999). Female and male consumers have also been shown to have different preferences when forming purchase intentions, with females preferring advertising that is more verbal and complex with men preferring simple and comparative advertising (Putrevu 2004).

It has thus been shown that females are more engaged in both language use and advertising and place a higher importance both on the way they speak and on the verbal content of marketing messages. However, no research has combined these two aspects, by looking at differences in language use between males and females within service encounters. As females are paying more attention to language in a wide variety of contexts, it would seem probable that female consumers pay more attention than male consumers to using their native language in service encounters.

- H1** The perceived importance of using the consumer's native language will be higher for female consumers than for male consumers

## **Method**

The study for this paper focused on possible differences in the way that consumers are affected by language in service encounters, targeting the possible differences between female and male consumers. The empirical research was divided into two stages. The first stage consisted of a pre-study, which enabled the soliciting of nine service encounters in which language could be an issue. The interviews were followed by the main study, in which a questionnaire based on the service encounters found in the pre-study was distributed on two markets, one American (Canada) and one European (Finland). Canada and Finland were chosen as both countries are officially bilingual. This was deemed beneficiary for the study, as it allowed for selecting respondents that were used to engaging in service encounters in which they sometimes have had to switch from their native language to the other language on the market. For this reason, the study focused on cities in which the national minority, French-speakers in Canada and Swedish-speakers in Finland, made up a regional majority. The largest such city in each country was thus selected, being Montréal in Canada and Jakobstad in Finland.

### *Pre-Study*

The first part of the study consisted of a pre-study in the form of interviews with consumers having varying degrees of bilingual skills. The interviews resulted in a list of a number of service encounters in which language was described as being either very important or of low importance.

The sample for the pre-study consisted of ten native Swedish-speakers who originated from different parts of the country, but who were all living in the Finnish capital of Helsinki at the time of the interviews. Helsinki is an officially bilingual city but with a large Finnish majority; for this reason, all the respondents were used to conducting services in their second language. The respondents could thus be expected to have ample experience of possible situations in which language influence in service

encounters could have been felt to be an issue. The sample was made up of five males respondents and five female respondents between the ages of 20 and 30. The results of the interviews indicated that the language impact in service encounters is context specific. Services of high-perceived importance were characterised by the interviewees often choosing the service provider based on the possibility of being served in their native language, even if it meant a higher cost. Services often mentioned in this category included hospital visits, banking and insurances. Everyday services such as a café visit or buying food in a grocery store were characterised by language not having any reported impact on the consumers, many respondents mentioning that they ignored language in such service encounters. This shows similarities to research into the behaviour of Hispanic consumers, who have been shown to be more likely to prefer a Hispanic service provider in a high involvement service than in a low involvement service. (Donthu and Cherian 1994). This difference between native language use in hospitals, banking and insurance as opposed to other services was reported repeatedly by both female and male respondents in the pre-study, suggesting that both paid particular importance to native language use in these service encounters.

- H2** The service encounters in which native language use is perceived to be most/least important will be highly correlated between female and male consumers

### *Main Study*

Based on the results of the pre-study, a questionnaire was designed and used to test the importance of speaking one's native language in different service encounters. This was done by using Likert-scales from 1-9, asking the consumers to rate the perceived importance of using their native language in the nine types of service encounters found in the questionnaire. Seven of the nine scenarios were based on encounters explicitly mentioned in the pre-study as being either very important or not important at all: banking, insurance, medical visit, electric installations, hairdresser, (all of them important) as well as buying food and going to a café (not important). Reviewing these scenarios, it seemed that the scenarios requiring more involvement were also more expensive. In order to be able to distinguish the influence of price from the influence of involvement, two scenarios were added: buying an expensive etching and buying a holiday on-line; the former consisting of a simple transaction just like buying food or a coffee, but at a much higher price. The latter scenario involved a situation in which no oral communication was needed, just a passive knowledge of the language. The questionnaire was pre-tested both in Finland and in Canada, and adjusted accordingly. The questionnaire was further translated into each of the four languages, so that the translator always translated into his own native language.

### *Sample*

The questionnaire was distributed to undergraduate students at an Anglophone and at a Francophone university in Montréal, and to Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking undergraduates respectively in Jakobstad. A total of 440 questionnaires were distributed, resulting in 373 returned and usable questionnaires, return ratio 84.8%. The questionnaire was bilingual with English on one side and French on the other in

Montréal and Finnish/Swedish in Jakobstad. The respondents were asked to fill it in according to their native language. In both cities, the average age was approximately the same in all four groups (23.6) and all four groups showed a higher proportion of females than the national average, mirroring a higher tendency for females to pursue higher education. The sample included respondents who spoke another language than English/French in Canada or Finnish/Swedish in Finland. These respondents were not included in the analysis as the difference between native speakers and second-language speakers might have affected the results.

## Results

The results of the study are outlined in Table 1. It can be seen that female respondents perceived the importance of using their native language in service encounters to be higher than the male respondents did in all of the nine service encounters in the study. The differences were rather small, however, and with regards to the individual encounters, the difference was significant for only three of the service encounters: hairdressing ( $p < 0.01$ ), insurance ( $p < 0.05$ ) and buying an etching ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Hypothesis 1 suggested that the perceived importance of native language use in service encounters would be higher for female consumers than for male consumers. In order to test whether the pattern of female respondents perceiving a higher importance of native language use in service encounters was significant, a multivariate analysis of variance was conducted. In the analysis, gender was used as the independent variable while the nine service encounters were employed as dependent variables. Before the analysis, the data was checked for normality, linearity, univariate and multivariate outliers, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices and multicollinearity. The data was found to be suitable for the analysis on all accounts. The results of the multivariate analysis of variance confirmed the existence of a significant difference between female and male respondents,  $F(9, 299) = 2.2$ ,  $p = 0.022$ ; Wilks' Lambda = 0.938. Hypothesis 1 was thus accepted.

Hypothesis 2 stated that service encounters in which native language use is perceived to be most/least important would be highly correlated between female and male consumers. The results confirmed a strong correlation, outlined graphically in Figure 1, between the importance female and male consumers perceive in the different kinds of service encounters ( $r = 98.53$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Hypothesis two was accepted.

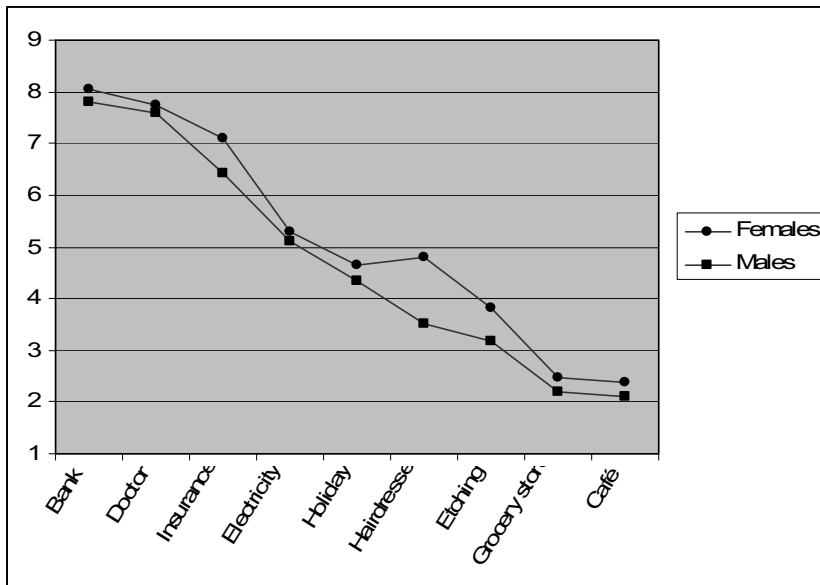
**Table 1** Perceived importance of native language use in service encounters for female and male consumers

	Kön	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Bank	Female	241	8.04	1.93
	Male	68	7.81	1.98
Doctor	Female	241	7.75	2.13
	Male	68	7.60	2.18
Insurance	Female	241	7.09 *	2.07
	Male	68	6.41	2.23
Electricity	Female	241	5.29	2.53
	Male	68	5.10	2.44
Holiday	Female	241	4.66	2.54
	Male	68	4.34	2.64
Hairdresser	Female	241	4.81 **	2.71
	Male	68	3.50	2.72
Etching	Female	241	3.83 *	2.26
	Male	68	3.18	2.20
Grocery store	Female	241	2.46	1.95
	Male	68	2.19	1.71
Café	Female	241	2.38	1.87
	Male	68	2.10	1.82

Significance levels

\*\* : p &lt; 0.01

\* : p &lt; 0.05

**Figure 1** Correlations for perceived importance of native language use between female and male consumers



## Discussion

As research into gender differences both in service encounters and in language use has found that females are paying more attention both to how they interact as consumers, to how they process information and to how they use language in general, it was expected that female consumers would perceive a higher importance of native language use in service encounters. Hence the results showing that this appears to be the case is perhaps not particularly surprising. It is, however, interesting to note that this higher perceived importance for females was found throughout the spectre of the nine different service encounters in the study. In fact, female respondents perceived a slight but still higher importance of using their native language even in services that had been mentioned mostly or exclusively by male respondents in the pre-study, such as electric installations. At the same time, it should be kept in mind that the difference between female and male consumers in the individual service encounters was relative low, as can be seen in Figure 1. While the pattern of females perceived a higher importance of native language use in service encounters was significant, the differences in the individual service encounters were significant in only three cases, insurance, hairdressing and buying an etching.

The data gathered in Canada and Finland was checked individually. The same tendency of females reporting a higher perceived importance of native language use in every service encounter was found to be the case both on the Canadian and the Finnish market. This is in agreement with sociolinguistic research that has shown the gender differences in language use to be very similar across different countries (Labov 1966, Gal 1978, Trudgill 1983, Watt 2002). It would thus seem to be fairly certain to state that a genuine gender difference exists in terms of language use in services.

Although it was found that female consumers generally appear to perceive a higher importance than male consumers regarding language use in service encounters, both females and males prioritised native language use in the same services. The strong correlation found between female and male consumers in the study indicate that there is a general agreement on prioritising language in service encounters such as banking, insurance and medicine while paying it less attention in more everyday services like grocery shopping or café visits. While females placed a somewhat higher importance than males on a general level, the correlation as illustrated in Figure 1 shows that both genders match each other closely, with the exception of hairdressing. The results of the interviews also pointed in the same direction; with the exception of male respondents mentioning electric installations and female respondents bringing up hairdressing, both female and male interviewees frequently discussed banking, insurance and hospital visits as examples of service encounters in which they perceived it to be important for them to be able to speak their native language. In the same way, visiting a café or buying groceries was also reported by both female and male interviewees as services in which they did not pay any particular attention to which language they spoke. It can thus be concluded that although there are differences in how important language is perceived to be, there is general agreement on which service encounters both female and male consumers prioritise in terms of speaking their native language.

Regarding the individual service encounters, the largest difference was found in the service of having a hair cut; the deviation of this particular service from the other eight encounters is evident from Figure 1. Already in the pre-study, it could be seen that females paid particularly more attention than males to using their native language when visiting a hairdresser. Given that this service is the only out of the nine service encounters in the study for which service providers both in Canada and Finland charge

a different price for female consumers than for male consumers, the large difference in such a service is noteworthy.

The standard deviations can be seen to be relatively high in all service encounters. This is the case for both genders, revealing a rather heterogeneous situation within all services. Respondents who either refused to take part in services if they could use their native language or who reported being completely indifferent to which language they used could be found among both genders. As could be expected, the standard deviations are lower both for services of high and low perceived language importance, while the services being rated in the middle of the spectre also display the highest standard deviations.

## Conclusions

The paper suggested that language is influencing consumers in service encounters, and that one characteristic of this influence could be a difference between female and male consumers. The results contribute to an improved understanding of language influence in service encounter as well as to a better understanding of gender in services. Earlier research has suggested that female consumers are more cognitively involved than male consumers (Falk and Campbell 1997), and the findings in the study lend support to this view. The study made for the paper confirms both some differences and some similarities in this regard.

Looking first at the similarities, the general outcome was similar for both genders with a high correlation between the importance that both groups paid to native language use within the different service encounters. This could be seen most clearly in the service encounters characterised by high consumer participation and by a high potential impact on the consumers.

Concerning the differences between females and males, the results indicate that female consumers attach greater importance to language in service encounters than male consumers do. This is in line with earlier research carried out on gender differences within shopping, finding that female consumers are generally more involved in their decision making, spending more time and mental energy to evaluate different options while male consumers prefer spending less time on the decision making. (Forseth 2005, Dholakia 1999). Although female and male respondents in the present study showed a strong correlation, females attached a higher importance to native language use within every service encounter included in the study. This higher importance was significant in three out of the nine service encounters, and was at its highest in the case of hairdressing, a service encounter that had been especially signalled out by female respondents already in the pre-study.

The results would seem to indicate that there are differences in *how* important female and male consumers find it to be able to speak their native language with the service provider. At the same time, however, the results also show that there would appear to be virtually no gender difference regarding in *which* service encounter native language that was particularly valuable to them, with hairdressing as the only service encounter that to a certain extent breaks the pattern.

### *Managerial Implications*

Although a tendency exists for female consumers to prioritise their native language more than male consumers do, the results do not suggest a priori that a given service would be deemed more important from the point of view as using one's native language for females. Within many of the service encounters, the differences between female and male consumers are too small to be statistically significant, and both genders display a large degree of internal variation. What is safe to conclude is that both genders perceive language to be important, especially in high-involvement services, and show a strong and significant language influence on their choice of service provider throughout all kinds of service encounters. Any additional evaluation should be carried out within the specific kind of service encounter before attempting segmentation based on language and gender.

It is interesting to note that the service encounter in which the difference between female and male consumers is at its highest is at the same time the only service encounter for which service providers both in Finland and in Canada regularly charge different prices for female and male consumers, with females typically paying a higher price. It is interesting to ponder whether the gender difference found in the study is due to this difference in price or whether the possibility to set different prices in the service derives from a difference in how important the service is perceived to be. It opens up for the possibility that part of the gender difference might be due to differences in price perceptions. An additional option, as pointed out in one of the interviews, is that females enjoy talking more with service personnel than males do. While this might especially be true for conversations with the hairdresser, it could also have played a role in the outcomes of the other encounters.

### *Further research*

Given the lack of research into both language in service encounters and gender differences in services, more research would be needed. Especially regarding language influence in service encounters, virtually no research exists. While this study focused on the gender aspect, differences between speakers of different languages, between age groups and between different types of services would all be like to prove beneficial fields for further research. It should also be kept in mind that the two countries used in this study, Canada and Finland, are both among the most emancipated countries in the world and it is possible that the differences would be larger still within other countries.

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## THE INFLUENCE OF LANGUAGE ACROSS MARKETS

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### Abstract

**In a world with a global economy, international interactions are increasing with people spending more time in countries other than their own and learning more languages. As ever more people and even markets get multilingual, both consumers and companies face situations where consumers are dealing with companies in another language than their own. While language is likely to have an impact on all areas of marketing, this paper argues that the area of service marketing is especially influenced, because of the importance of the interaction between the consumer and the service personnel. If they do not share a common language, communication and the whole service itself may suffer. This paper addresses this issue by examining how consumers in two different markets perceive the value of using their native language in service encounters, in contrast with using another language. The research was carried out in two bilingual countries, one American (Canada) and one European (Finland), and the results show that the perceived importance of native language use is similar in both countries but that the reasons behind these attitudes are partly different.**

**Key words:** Service marketing, language in service encounters, cultural differences in services

## Introduction

Service encounters are defined by interactions in which both the consumer and the service personnel play integral roles (Bitner 1990; Grönroos 1984; Surprenant and Solomon 1987). Such is the importance of this interaction between companies and consumers that it has been argued that for the consumer, these encounters *are* the service (Bitner 1990). Given this, it is not surprising that interactions involving communication and the consumer's participation in the service encounters have received considerable attention within the field of services marketing (Grönroos 1978; 1984; Bitner, Faranda, Hubbert and Zeithaml 1997; Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman 1996). Much of the research on interactions and communication in services, however, appear to assume that the consumer and the service personnel by definition are *able* to interact and communicate effortlessly with each other. Such communication would require a common language. In order to take this for granted, the market needs to be fairly homogenous.

The homogenous market, however, is gone. In major US cities such as New York, Los Angeles and Miami, non-Hispanic whites<sup>9</sup> now make up less than 35% of the population. 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). In Europe, both countries and markets are becoming less and less homogenous. Two factors in particular account for this development. One is the presence of indigenous minorities in most European countries. The largest of the groups is the around five million Catalan speakers in Spain, but every European country except Iceland has got linguistic minorities within its borders. EBLUL, the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, estimates that there are around 50 million native speakers of minority languages within the European Union. The other factor is the immigration to most European countries. People with an immigrant background make up around eight million in the United Kingdom, slightly over seven million in Germany and close to seven million in France. 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 main language of the country, and thus the market, in which they live. In addition, markets are becoming less and less dependent on national boundaries, with more multinational companies and expatriates living and working abroad. A global situation is emerging in which it can no longer be taken for granted that the consumer and the company speak the same language.

Within marketing, it has often been taken for granted that companies and consumers speak the same language and researches have largely ignored the role that language plays in communication between business partners who do not share the same native language (Visser 1997; Clarke, 2000; Marcella and Davies, 2004). Highlighting the problems this may cause in the communication between company and consumer as well as the lack of research into this situation, Marcella and Davies (2004) present the following situations in which the lack of a common native language is likely to cause problems.

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<sup>9</sup> Non-Hispanic white is the official US census term for a person of Caucasian origin who is not from a Spanish-speaking background.

1. the *communicator's* native *language* complemented by foreign language capability;
2. the *message* encoded in a particular *language*;
3. spoken and written *language* present in the *channels* of communication; and
4. the *receiver's* native *language* and foreign language capability (Marcella and Davies 2004)

This paper focuses on the fourth of these points, and does it within the setting of service encounters. While language is likely to have an impact on all areas of marketing, this paper argues that the area of service marketing is especially influenced, because of the importance of the interaction between the consumer and the service personnel. If they do not share a common language, communication and the whole service itself may suffer. This paper addresses this issue by examining how consumers in two different markets perceive the value of using their native language in service encounters, in contrast with using another language. The research was carried out in two bilingual countries, one American (Canada) and one European (Finland).

### **The Service Encounter**

The service encounter has been defined as “the dyadic interaction between a customer and a service provider” (Surprenant and Solomon 1987), emphasising the active involvement of both parties in the service. As service encounters are characterised by interactions, with both the consumer and the service personnel taking an active part (Bitner 1990; Grönroos 1984; Surprenant and Solomon 1987), the need for mutual comprehension could be likely to render services particularly impressionable by communication difficulties caused by language.

Within the field of marketing, not much attention has been called to the consequences of the consumer and the company not sharing the same language (Marcella and Davies, 2004). What has been shown, in other fields, is that it is not enough that the consumer is able to communicate with the company in a language that he knows. One such case is seen in hospitals in California, where research has shown that Spanish-speaking patients perceived a higher quality if their doctor could speak with them in their native language (Morales, Cunningham, Brown, Liu and Hays 1999; Fernandez, Schillinger, Grumbach, Rosenthal, Stewart, Wang and Pérez-Stable, 2004).

#### *Language and Culture within the Service Encounter*

Although studies on language in marketing are rare, some attention has been called to its role within cultural influences. Cultures, by definition, differ from each other, so it is perhaps not surprising that consumer behaviour also can vary from one culture to another. (Hirschman 1981; Grier and Bumbaugh 1999). The ways in which consumers interact with companies are often also influenced by various cultural factors (Donthu and Cherian 1994; Hui, Laroche and Kim 1998; Kim and Kang, 2001; Schaninger, Bourgeois and Buss, 1985). Much of the research carried out on cultural differences has focused on aspects featuring relatively little interaction between consumers and companies. This includes research on consumers' shopping mall behaviour (Donthu and Cherian, 1994; Laroche, Teng, Michon and Chebat, 2005; Michon and Chebat, 2004; Mulhern and Williams, 1994) or on the consumer's perceptions of advertising

(Appiah, 2001; Green, 1999; Grier and Bumbaugh, 1993; Lass and Hart, 2004). From a service point of view, the role that cultural differences play in the service evaluation and the consumer's behaviour in different kinds of service encounters have not received the same amount of attention. Some research on culture in service counters exist, finding that there are indeed differences, but these studies do not include how languages may influence the service encounter (Mattila, 1999; 2000). This is noteworthy, given the fact that service encounters are characterised by an interaction between two parties in which the exchange of communication can be influenced by cultural differences, a fact to which attention has been called within the field of medicine (Fernandez et al., 2004; Morales et al., 1999) and within sales negotiations (Chairsrakeo and Speece, 2004).

Not much research has been done on differences between language groups, and those studies that exist have usually just used language as a way to divide groups but not taken the aspect of actually being able – or unable – to speak one's language into question. (Mulhern and Williams, 1994; Michon and Chebat, 2004). One of the markets examined in this paper, Canada, has been the topic of a number of marketing studies, often focusing on cultural differences between English and French Canadians (Hui, Joy, Kim and Laroche, 1993; Laroche, Saad, Kim and Browne, 2000; Michon and Chebat, 2004), and on how tensions between English and French Canadians may affect their consumer behaviour (Ouellet, 2007). Research on the differences between Finnish and Swedish Finns in business contexts is much more rare. Some rather common differences found in Canada include the findings that French-Canadians appear to focus more on hedonistic values while English-speakers are more pragmatic. (Chéron and Muller, 1993; Hui et al., 1993; Michon and Chebat, 2004; Schaninger et al., 1985). Thus there appears to exist genuine differences in cultural traits, language and consumer behaviour between English- and French-speaking Canadians. Based on the wealth of findings suggesting that different language groups display different behaviour in business contexts, this paper sets out to research the differences between four groups, focusing specifically on language and its influence in service encounters.

### *Languages as Identifiers*

Apart from its role as a tool of communication, languages may hold emotional connotations for at least some consumers. Languages do not only function as conveyors of communication, they can also communicate identities and loyalties in themselves. From a service perspective, both roles are important. Consumers do not only evaluate the quality of the service; even consumers who are fully fluent in another language may prefer to use their native language, sometimes strongly so, for other reasons than just ease of communication. (Fernandez et al., 2004; Morales et al., 1999). Looking at the socio-linguistic environment of Jerusalem, Spolsky and Cooper discuss signs in the old town. (Spolsky and Cooper, 1991). They found that the languages a company uses display its loyalties. Given the tense situation in the city, the perceived loyalties of companies have a huge influence on which consumers they attract. The first hint of a company's loyalties is its signs. In Jerusalem, the choice between Arabic and Hebrew immediately tells consumers and passers-by the loyalties of the company and plays a part in determining which group that will frequent the company. (Cf Spolsky and Cooper, 1991 : 74-94) Although such tension might strengthen the identification with language and the own group, the way language influences identity is not limited to tense situations. Looking at Croatian respondents faced with the option between Croatian and English, Brala (2007) has been able to show that most people feel that their perception of their own identity is changed when speaking another language than

one's native language, thus confirming earlier research showing a similar connection between language use and identity (Pavlenko, 2006; Wilson, 2005).

## **Methodology**

The study focused on similarities and differences in the way that consumers are affected by language in service encounters, looking at the two markets of Canada and Finland. The first stage of the study consisted of a pre-study, which enabled the soliciting of service encounters in which language could be an issue. This was followed by the main study, in which a questionnaire based on the service encounters found in the pre-study was distributed on two markets, one American (Canada) and one European (Finland). Canada and Finland were chosen, as both countries are officially bilingual. This was deemed beneficiary for the study, as it allowed for selecting respondents that were used to service encounters in which they sometimes have had to switch from their native language to the other language on the market. For this reason, the study focused on cities in which the national minority, French-speakers in Canada and Swedish-speakers in Finland, made up a regional majority. The largest such city in each country was thus selected, being Montréal in Canada and Jakobstad in Finland.

### *Pre-Study*

A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for the pre-study in order to find out not only in which service encounters a language was used, but also the reasons offered by the respondents for making their choices. In order to achieve as reliable results as possible, the respondents were asked to describe real situations that they had encountered. Instead of focusing on hypothetical situations, the answers regarding the language influence on the consumers in different service encounters are based on actual examples provided by the respondents as contexts in which they were already using either their first or their second language. Echoing earlier findings on even very fluent bilinguals (La Heij et al. 1996; Luna and Peracchio, 2001), even those respondents who are fluent in both languages and have grown up speaking both languages with their parents still showed a preference towards their stronger language in a few services encounters. These encounters were the same for all the respondents, and are characterised by a high personal and/or monetary value and a high degree of interaction between the consumer and the company. This reflects research showing that service encounters with a potentially high impact are viewed differently by consumers (McDougal and Levesque, 2000). It is also in line with earlier research into how communication quality and satisfaction in health care services is affected by language (Morales et al., 1999; Jacobs et al., 2006).

### *Main study*

Based on the results of the pre-study, a questionnaire was designed to test the importance of native language use in different service encounters. For the questionnaire, it was decided to use scenarios involving match choice. In each scenario, a service encounter was described to the consumer who could chose from a service provider using his native language or a service provider using the other language of the market. The price for the service in the consumer's native language was given, and he was then asked to give the price at which he would consider the service in the second language to be of better value to him. The rationale for using price as a measure of the

importance of native language use was based on service research showing that consumers bonding with the company may indicate this by being prepared to pay a price premium (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1996). The second part of the questionnaire consisted of Likert-scales from 1-9, asking the consumers to rate the perceived importance of using their native language in the nine types of service encounters found in the questionnaire and, finally, to rate their knowledge of the two main languages on the market

A first version of the questionnaire, consisting of twelve scenarios, was deemed as requiring too much time for the study, and the questionnaire was scaled down to nine scenarios. Seven of these nine scenarios were based on encounters explicitly mentioned in the pre-study as being either very important or not important at all. These encounters were: banking, insurance, medical visit, electric installations, hairdresser, (all of them important) as well as buying food and going to a café (not important). Reviewing these scenarios, it seemed that the scenarios requiring more involvement were also more expensive. In order to be able to distinguish the influence of price from the influence of involvement, two scenarios were added: buying an expensive etching and buying a holiday on-line. Although the price of the service would place it outside the everyday encounters, it is still no difference from a language perspective than a simple transaction just like buying food or a coffee, albeit at a much higher price. The latter scenario of buying a holiday involved a situation in which no oral communication was needed, just a passive knowledge of the language but with a vocabulary outside the everyday encounters.

For the match choice scenarios, it was decided to ask for the consumers' willingness to pay between the two languages. The reason for this choice was to present the respondents with an overarching choice that was easily explained and understood, in order to achieve as reliable results as possible. Choosing willingness to pay is not intended to find a general level for prices in different services, just to make the choices more tangible. Although the prices in the scenarios were picked to be realistic, no conclusions can be made about the general price consumers are willing to pay for a given service – apart from the difference caused by language. Thus, any consideration of prices in services outside the scope of language is also outside the scope of this article. The questionnaire was pre-tested both in Finland and in Québec, and adjusted accordingly to the comments received. The questionnaire was further and back translation was used to ensure the questionnaire being correct. Finally, both Canadian and Finnish test-persons read through the final version to check for possible cultural factors that could have biased the results.

### *Sample*

The questionnaire was distributed to undergraduate students at an Anglophone and at a Francophone university in Montréal, and to Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking undergraduates respectively in Jakobstad. A total of 440 questionnaires were distributed, resulting in 373 returned and usable questionnaires, return ratio 84.8%, the return ratio was 82.7% in Montréal and 91.9% in Jakobstad. The questionnaire was bilingual with English on one side and French on the other in Montréal and Finnish/Swedish in Jakobstad. The respondents were asked to fill it in according to their native language. In both cities, the average age was approximately the same in all four groups (22.5) and all four groups showed a higher proportion of females than the national average, mirroring a higher tendency for females to pursue higher education. The sample included 84 respondents who spoke another language than English/French

in Canada or Finnish/Swedish in Finland. These respondents were not included in the analysis as the difference between native speakers and second-language speakers might have affected the results.

After the main study had been conducted, a control study was carried out. The aim of the control study was to check the responses in the main study regarding the importance of speaking one's first language in the services. There was a risk that respondents would just answer which services they thought were the most important in general rather than taking the language aspect into consideration. In order to be able to rule this out, the control study consisted of the same questionnaire in which respondents were asked to rank services on a scale from 1 to 9, but language was not mentioned at all in the control study. The respondents in the control study thus ranked only the importance of the services, and it was expected that their answers would turn out to be different from those in the four language groups. This would allow it to be established that there is indeed a genuine language influence in the answers of the main study. The control study was distributed to a sample of 28 Swedish-speaking respondents in Finland, corresponding to the respondents in the main study.

## **Results**

The average perceived importance of using one's native language in the nine service scenarios are given in Table 1, alongside the perceived importance of the services in the control group. As can be seen in the table, the differences between the four language groups are all relatively small although the perceived importance of language in high-involvement services is somewhat higher for the two groups on the Finnish market. In contrast, the differences between all four language groups and the control groups are more evident. The results of the control group differ significantly from at least one of the language groups in six of the service encounters. All the language groups display a clear difference between high-, middle-, and low-involvement services while this difference is erased when language is not considered. It is especially in the low-involvement scenarios and in the high-involvement scenario of banking that the differences between the language groups and the control group are at their highest.

Looking in more detail at the general pattern in the different groups in Table 1, it can be seen that not only the results from the control group turned out to be rather different. The common pattern found in the four language groups is substantially different from the control group. It can also be established that all the four language groups show a strong similarity in which services they prioritise the most. Banking is seen as the most important, a medical visit as second, insurance as third etc. in all the four groups. In this case as well, the control group differs to a larger degree from the four language groups than they do between themselves.

**Table 1 Comparison of the language groups and the control group**

	<b>French</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Finnish</b>	<b>Swedish</b>	<b>Control</b>
<b>Bank</b>	8.13*	7.40	8.30*	8.20*	6.62
<b>Medical visit</b>	7.67	7.31	8.01	7.96	7.77
<b>Insurance</b>	6.73	6.57	7.18	7.65	6.73
<b>Electricity</b>	5.62	4.98	4.97	5.33	5.92
<b>Holiday</b>	4.79	4.28*	4.61	4.69	6.19
<b>Haircut</b>	4.53*	3.95*	4.97	4.78	6.23
<b>Painting</b>	3.48*	3.80*	3.77*	3.78*	5.65
<b>Grocery store</b>	2.70*	2.25*	2.11*	2.43*	6.35
<b>Café</b>	2.72*	2.05*	2.00*	2.40*	5.96

\* Significantly different from the control group ( $p < 0.05$ )

Table 2 displays the correlations using Spearman's rank correlations between the four language groups and the control group. As can be seen, the answers of every language group is strongly correlated to every other language group, while the correlations with the control group are considerable lower. The control study thus lends support to stating that the homogenous results found in all the language groups appears to not just the results of generally perceiving some services as more important than others, but rather a result of a genuine language influence on the perception of services. When language was taken out of the service encounters, the respondents in the control group did not perceive the high-involvement services of banking, insurance and a medical visit to be as crucial as did the respondents in the main study when facing the possibility of not being able to speak their native language in these service encounters.

**Table 2 Correlations between the perceived importance of the nine service encounters**

	<b>English</b>	<b>French</b>	<b>Finnish</b>	<b>Swedish</b>	<b>Control</b>
<b>English</b>	1				
<b>French</b>	0.987**	1			
<b>Finnish</b>	0.984**	0.990**	1		
<b>Swedish</b>	0.988**	0.993**	0.995**	1	
<b>Control</b>	0.694*	0.685*	0.695*	0.697*	1

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level



As better skills in the second language could be thought to make consumers more prepared to use it, consumers were asked to rate their skills in both languages and the results were tested against the perceived importance of language in each scenario. Table 3 presents the correlations<sup>10</sup> between the respondents' reported skills in their second language and the perceived importance of speaking their native language in the service. Almost all the correlations are negative, thus a poorer command of the second language does indeed lead to the consumer regarding it as more important to be able to use their native language. However, almost all correlations are rather weak. Although there is a moderate correlation between language skills and perceived importance of the native language in the three high-involvement encounters, the correlations turn out to be very low in the remaining six encounters. In the three high-involvement scenarios with a moderate correlation, the correlations on the Finnish market are higher than on the Canadian market. This would appear to confirm that language skills was having a stronger influence in Finland than in Canada, as the qualitative study suggests. When a consumer is not able to speak the language of the service provider, this will matter the most in service encounter in which the communication is felt to be crucial, and the Finnish respondents reported lower skills in the second language on their market.

**Table 3 Correlation coefficients between second language skills and perceived importance of native language use in the service encounters**

	<b>French</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Finnish</b>	<b>Swedish</b>
<b>Bank</b>	-0.33**	-0.30**	-0.44**	-0.50**
<b>Medical visit</b>	-0.38**	-0.20	-0.42**	-0.51**
<b>Insurance</b>	-0.28**	-0.19	-0.39**	-0.51**
<b>Electricity</b>	-0.25*	-0.16	-0.09	-0.22
<b>Holiday</b>	-0.28**	-0.09	-0.04	-0.15
<b>Haircut</b>	-0.31**	0.00	-0.18	-0.34*
<b>Painting</b>	-0.04	-0.15	-0.15	-0.10
<b>Grocery store</b>	-0.01	0.01	0.06	0.17
<b>Café</b>	-0.06	0.03	-0.05	-0.13

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Looking at the average price reductions that the consumers demand for going to a service provider using their second language instead of one using their native language, Table 4 gives the average demanded reduction for each of the nine service encounters in the four language groups. The demanded reductions range from rather low (6.82% for French speakers booking a holiday on-line) up to very high (57.17% for Swedish

<sup>10</sup> The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was employed.

speakers in the bank encounter). All the reductions for changing language differ significantly from the original price of the service, indicating that the respondents show a strong preference for using their native language in all kinds of service encounters.

**Table 4** Average demanded price reductions for the service being equally valuable in the consumers' second language as in their first. The original price is given in the column 'price'

<b>Service encounter</b>	<b>Price</b>	<b>French</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Finnish</b>	<b>Swedish</b>
<b>Bank</b>	350	26.45%	22.24%	53.71%	57.17%
<b>Medical visit</b>	180	35.78%	38.64%	47.49%	45.80%
<b>Insurance</b>	1400	24.71%	17.05%	39.31%	42.09%
<b>Electricity</b>	320	18.79%	15.42%	22.26%	21.68%
<b>Holiday</b>	2500	6.82%	8.39%	8.67%	8.71%
<b>Haircut</b>	40	34.14%	27.59%	32.42%	32.60%
<b>Painting</b>	12000	9.37%	8.42%	6.98%	7.89%
<b>Grocery store</b>	50	16.69%	14.75%	9.14%	12.58%
<b>Café</b>	3.50	27.54%	17.04%	17.51%	26.09%

*The reductions for each service within each consumer group are significant ( $p < 0.05$ )*

## **Analysis**

The analysis draws on the results of both the quantitative and qualitative data gathered from the study by first analysing the quantitative results presented above before interpreting them further with the help of the qualitative data.

The similarities between the four language groups in the study seem to outweigh the differences. As outlined in Table 1 above, the patterns in the groups correspond very closely to each other. Despite that, some differences exist between the groups. The results from the Canadian market are slightly more evenly distributed than in Finland. The two Finnish language groups appear to put even more emphasis on using their native language in encounters that all groups find highly important and, in contrast, pay even less attention to language in services that all groups find rather unimportant from a language perspective. However, these differences are very small and generally not large enough to be significant. Much more striking is how closely the patterns for the four groups follow each other, both in the perceived importance of language for the individual services and even more so in terms of which service they rank first, second etc. Table 5 is used here to visualise the rather striking similarities in this regard.

**Table 5 Internal ranking of the importance of language in the nine service encounters**

	<b>French</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Finnish</b>	<b>Swedish</b>	<i>Control</i>
<b>Bank</b>	1	1	1	1	3
<b>Medical visit</b>	2	2	2	2	1
<b>Insurance</b>	3	3	3	3	2
<b>Electricity</b>	4	4	4	4	8
<b>Holiday</b>	5	5	6	6	6
<b>Haircut</b>	6	6	5	5	5
<b>Painting</b>	7	7	7	7	9
<b>Grocery store</b>	9	8	8	8	4
<b>Café</b>	8	9	9	9	7

As can be seen, all the groups in the main study conform almost completely to each other, with only very minor differences. As the results of the correlation analysis between the language groups and the control group demonstrated, this close similarity would indeed appear to be the result of explicitly rating the importance of languages. The results from the control group that did not consider language in its responses yielded a much more divergent pattern. As could perhaps be expected, the service encounters of banking, insurance and medical consultation still turned out to be of high perceived importance in the control group, but the gap between them and the other services all but disappeared when language was no longer an issue.

The correlations between all four groups in the main study are highly significant, while the correlations between every language group and the control group are substantially lower. The results thus confirm not only the existence of a language influence in services, but also suggest a language influence that is remarkably consistent between different markets and different languages groups. The results also demonstrate the importance of involvement on perceptions in the service encounter. Earlier research on two of the four groups in this study, English and French speaking Canadians, has shown that these groups display differences in many cultural aspects. (Hui *et al.*, 1997; Laroche *et al.*, 2000; Michon and Chebat, 2004) While this is not contested by this paper, these differences do not seem to extend to the influence of language in service encounters. As outlined above, there are differences between how important French and English Canadians perceive the services, but they mirror each other almost perfectly regarding which they rank as most important. Furthermore, not only do the two Finnish groups conform to each other as closely as the two Canadian groups, but all four groups also seem to agree almost completely on which services they perceive to most important, second, third etc.

Perhaps a bit unexpectedly, the correlations between the respondents' language skills in their second language and their desire to use their native language turned out to be relatively weak. This leads back to the role of language as something more than just a

tool of communication. If communication were all that mattered, consumers could still be expected to pay price premiums for services in which they perceive it as important to be able to use their native language. However, they would probably not do so in services in which they perceive it to be unimportant. The fact that they are still prepared to do so suggests a feeling of loyalty inherent in the language. Alongside the weak correlations, many of the written responses gathered from the respondents also support this view. Some of the respondents explicitly commented, even in the case of the café (ranked as least important), that language was an issue for them. None of them mentioned communication itself being a problem in low-involvement encounters, but still stated that they felt more comfortable with a service provider using their native language. A probable consequence of this is that although service providers operating in high-involvement services are most likely to gain from using the consumers' language(s), there seems to be no service so devoid of communication that many consumers would not be prepared to pay at least something extra in order to exchange a few words in their native language of preference.

That this is the case was demonstrated by the part of the study focusing on how much lower the price would have to be in a service encounter using the consumers' second language to be as valuable to them as in their native language. The results from the study show that all services resulted in very substantial price reductions. Even for those services in which consumers perceive it to be rather unimportant to use their native language, they are still prepared to pay a price premium to a service provider using their language.

Combining the results of the perceived importance of language in services and the results of the price reductions in the same services, it can be seen that it is important to distinguish between how important language is felt to be and whether consumers are prepared to pay a price premium to use it. Although neither of the two markets used in this research is remotely as tense as the situation in Jerusalem (cf. Spolsky and Cooper 1991), the conclusions seem to be the same. Languages may function as signs of loyalties and connectedness. Only in high-involvement services where both communication and the outcome are important for the consumers is language seen as something necessary. In bilingual markets, as both markets in this study are, this is perhaps not so surprising. Since all consumers on these markets are used to speak their native language in most or even all encounters, it is not surprising that they feel reluctant to speak another language in encounters where communication is crucial. In addition, consumers are almost as prepared to pay a price premium in the medium- and low-involvement service encounters as in the high-involvement ones. As is evident by many of the written answers accompanying these results, the result is more emotional than functional. The fact that respondents are prepared to pay more to a company that uses their native language shows the role of language as an identifying factor.

### *Similarities and Differences between the Markets*

As has been discussed above, there are some strong similarities between the two markets in this study. It is interesting to notice that despite the very large difference in size between Montréal and Jakobstad and the implications this carries with it, the differences between the two groups in Montréal on the one side and the groups in Jakobstad on the other are relatively small. Regarding the price reductions consumers demand for using the second language on the market rather than their native language, the results show that language matters in all service encounters on both markets. The

importance consumers attach to speaking their native language in different service encounters follows the same pattern: the differences are small between all four groups.

Although the similarities between the language groups dominate, some differences can also be found. This becomes more evident by examining the written commentaries the respondents have provided to explain their answers. Although the overriding results are very clear – consumers from all four groups prefer using their native language – their motives for doing so appear to be at least somewhat different between Montréal and Jakobstad. In Montréal, the reasons the respondents gave for their choices were varied but centred on three main themes: financial reasons, knowledge-comfort reasons and political reasons. In Jakobstad, the first two of these themes were also very common but the third one was completely absent.

Respondents for whom the price was more important than the language, or at least important enough to influence the language decisions offered financial reasons in both countries. These consumers typically were ready to switch to a service provider not using their language already at a small price reduction and explained their choices by wanting the best price.

The knowledge-comfort reasons centred on the consumers' knowledge of the other language on the market and how comfortable they felt using it. These consumers often wanted a relatively large reduction to change service provider, explaining that they did not speak the other language of the market well enough to feel comfortable using it. These responses were quite rare in the low-involvement services, already rather prevalent in the mid-involvement services and so strong in the high-involvement services that many consumers from all four groups explained that they simply would not take part in the service in another language than their own. This was the case regardless of the price, since they felt the service to be too important for them risking not to understand everything.

The political reasons consisted of ideological objections to using the other language of the market. Some consumers using political arguments to explain their answers referred at times to the Charter of the French Language, outlining the right to use French in Québec. Others explicitly stated that for them to accept a service employee, he would better speak his language. This echoes research on how a tense situation between two groups on the same market may lead to attitudes influencing consumers' will to patronise companies perceived to belong to "the other" group. (Ouellet, 2007) Some consumers working as service personnel themselves stated that if they have to speak their second language with their consumers, the service personnel who interact with them should do the same thing. Unlike the knowledge-comfort answers, these answers were not more prevalent in any specific service encounter, they could be found all the way from the café service up to banking. As already stated, answers belonging to this group were given only in Montréal and not in Jakobstad.

Thus there appears to be at least some differences between the underlying reasons for the similar results in the two markets. Taking into account the quantitative data, it is possible to further strengthen this picture found in the qualitative part of the study. The average consumer's skill in the second language is considerably higher in Montréal than in Jakobstad. Both the English and the French speakers rate their knowledge in each other's languages (6.0 and 6.51) as much better than did the Finnish and Swedish speakers for each other's languages (4.97 and 5.11). Considering this difference in combination with the lack of political answers in Jakobstad, it would seem as if the market in Montréal would be closer to a market in which both groups are more *able* to

take part in service encounters in their second language, but may have political reasons for *not wanting* to do so. The market in Jakobstad, in contrast, would then be more characterised by two groups that do not display any political reasons for not wanting to use their second language, but avoid doing so because of a lack of knowledge in that language.

The extent to which political motives may influence the consumers was not tested in this study, but the influence of their language skills were. The results show that the correlation between knowledge in the second language and the perceived importance of using one's native language is higher in the Finnish market than in the Canadian. This is the case especially in the high-involvement services in which all groups perceive language to be most important. It should be remembered that the present study cannot state confirmatory that political reasons are more important in Montréal and that the influence of language skills are more important in Jakobstad. However, the political reasons given in Montréal, their absence in Jakobstad, the lower language skills found in the latter market and the higher correlation between skills in the second language and the perceived importance of using one's native language all point to this being a possibility.

## Conclusions

In virtually all markets, a growing proportion of consumers do not speak the main language on the market as their native language; this is especially the case in bilingual countries. Despite this, very little research has been devoted to how service encounters are influenced by language and culture. The study of the paper examined the impact of language in services on two bilingual markets, focusing on two language groups in each market.

The results indicate that small differences exist both between the groups on each market and between the two markets. In the former case, the national minority in both countries pays more attention to language while in the latter case, the results on the Canadian markets were neither as high in high-involvement scenarios nor as low in low-involvement scenarios as on the Finnish market.

Despite these minor differences, the overriding result of the study is a remarkable similarity between both markets and all the four language groups. There seems to be an almost complete agreement on in which services to prioritise language, and the pattern is remarkably stable despite the geographical distance, the cultural differences and the size of the market. That this pattern is a genuine language influence and not just a response to some services being seen as more important in general could be established by comparing the four language groups with a control group that did not include language. Only the control group turned out significantly different, confirming language as the common denominator in the similar results in both Canada and Finland.

It was also established that language is not just a neutral tool of communication, but a sign of belonging that matters even in services with very little communication. Looking at price premium consumers would be prepared to pay to deal with a service provider in their native language, the results in all four language groups yielded a significant price premium in every service encounter.

Lastly, a qualitative part of the main study found a possible underlying difference between the two markets. The Canadian market would appear to be characterised by political motives that are absent on the Finnish market, while language skills in the second language of the market was substantially lower in Finland. It was thus suggested that the Canadian results may be due to two groups relatively well at ease in each other languages but partly divided by ideological factors while the consumers on the Finnish market are more divided by not being able to communicate in each other's languages. Confirming whether this is the case fell outside the scope of this article, but it was suggested as a further study.

### *Limitations of the Paper and Future Research*

This paper focused on four language groups in two markets. The close correspondences between all four groups suggest that the findings may be general, but further research on additional markets would be beneficial.

Both Montréal and Jakobstad are bilingual markets and a strong language influence in services was found in both cities. Another common feature of both markets involved in this study is that the two languages are somewhat equal in many regards. Both English and French are among the most widely spoken languages in the world, official languages in 53 and 30 countries respectively and widely used as international languages. Both Swedish and Finnish are relatively small languages with official recognition only in Sweden and Finland. There is thus a relative equilibrium between the two languages of each market. It would be interesting to research the situation in a market where one of the languages is significantly larger than the other, such as Spanish and Catalan in Barcelona or French and Dutch in Brussels.

The findings on the reasons behind the consumers' perception of using their language addressed the issue of language competence, finding it to be somewhat more pronounced in Finland than in Canada. The findings also pointed towards the possibility of political motives being more present in Canada than in Finland, but it was outside the scope of this paper to test whether that is indeed the case. A further study could focus on correlations between both political motives, alongside language competence, and the perceived importance of speaking one's native language in services.

### *Managerial Implications*

From a managerial perspective, the implications of the findings are potentially far-reaching. Even in many markets with a large proportion of consumers with another language than that of the main language on the market, using the language of the consumer does not seem to even be an issue. Many companies ignore the possibility of providing these consumers with the opportunity to speak their native language. This is all the more noteworthy as the vast majority of all consumers appear to value speaking their native language to the extent that they are even prepared to pay a price premium for doing so. In markets where few companies use more than one language, a company offering this possibility to its consumers may gain a competitive advantage. On markets where this practice is already rather well established, companies who continue to ignore these consumer segments are unlikely to win them as consumers, as these consumers have been shown to be far more likely to patronise a service provider dealing with them in their native language.

Although the importance of speaking one's native language is perceived to be low in everyday scenarios with little communication, this is not to say that companies could not gain from using language in these service encounters as well. The results of the survey regarding how much consumers are willing to pay to be served in all languages shows that the consumers are prepared to pay significantly more in all service encounters to use a service provider employing their language rather than one who does not. It could be noted that the encounters the consumers perceive as most important for using their native language are probably precisely the encounters in which it is hardest to provide this service, and vice-versa. Just as the consumers feel more comfortable in ordering a coffee in their second language than discussing their bank loans, service employees would most probably also find it easier to serve coffee in their second language than provide detailed answers about bank loans. This situation constitutes a challenge for service providers. Based on the results of this paper, it is a challenge that it may be worthwhile taking.



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