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Language divergence in service encounters: Revisiting its influence on word-of-mouth☆

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ABSTRACT

Research on language accommodation highlights the significance of accommodating customers' language requirements during service encounters. This replication study reinvestigates whether language divergence influences word-of-mouth intentions in a continuously-provided service of retail banking. Specifically, this study examines the relationships among language divergence, interaction quality, relationship quality, and positive word-of-mouth intentions. Consistent with previous research, study findings show that customers served in their second language perceive interactions with a service provider to be less responsive, adversely affecting positive word-of-mouth intentions. Additionally, language divergence has a negative influence on customer perception of information quality and empathy with a service provider, which affects the quality of the relationship customers have with the service provider. These results extend the understanding of the process by which language divergence affects positive word-of-mouth intentions.

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1. Introduction

As more than half of the world's population can speak in more than one language, accommodating customers' language requirements plays a significant role in their evaluation of service encounters and service providers. Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2014) demonstrate that serving bilingual customers in their second language may lead to them evaluating the service provider as less responsive, which may reduce their intentions to spread positive word-of-mouth about the service provider. This is an important finding, as language serves as a principle vehicle for customer identity and facilitates effective interaction with a service provider.

Understanding two important issues will provide a greater understanding of the mechanism by which language divergence affects positive word-of-mouth. First, interaction quality, a key element of interpersonal interaction between a customer and a service provider, encompasses informational, emotional, and behavioral aspects (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Lu, Zhang, & Wang, 2009). Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2014) consider only the behavioral aspect of perceived employee responsiveness. Second, when customers receive service in their second language, they perceive the service provider as dissimilar (Duffy & Ferrier, 2003), potentially leading to a disparaging evaluation of the service provider. In other words, language divergence may adversely affect the quality of the buyer-seller relationship. The original study does not consider the role of language divergence in determining the quality of buyer-seller relationships.

Against this background, this study replicates the work of Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2014) with substantial conceptual and methodological differences which further test the propositions of the original article and provide additional insights for the role of language accommodation in service encounters. First, as replication leads to extension of the scope of the results and ensures managerial relevance (Hubbard, Vetter, & Little, 1998), this study tests the applicability of language divergence in a different service context, as well as in a different national context. Specifically, this study examines the role of language divergence using banking services in the Malaysian context, providing further insights into the generalizability of the original work's results and subsequent practical applicability (Easley, Madden, & Dunn, 2000).

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Second, instead of focusing on the mediating role of responsiveness, this study proposes a broad mediating role of interaction quality that captures informational, emotional, and behavioral aspects (Brady & Cronin, 2001). Consequently, this study examines the mediating role of information quality, empathy, and responsiveness in the relationship between language divergence and positive word-of-mouth. Finally, as communicative adjustments during service interactions may affect customer evaluation of their relationship with the service provider (Imamura, Zhang, & Harwood, 2011), this study extends the original work by examining the mediating role of relationship quality in the language divergence and positive word-of-mouth linkages.

2. Relationship between language divergence, interaction quality, relationship quality and word-of-mouth

Communication accommodation theory (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991), formerly speech accommodation theory, seeks to explain speakers' motivation to adjust their communicative styles during an interaction, as well as the social cognitive process by which others in the interaction perceive, evaluate, and respond to these communicative adjustments. Extant literature suggests that communication accommodation takes a number of forms in a variety of contexts. In multilingual countries, language adjustments are vital for communication efficacy. When language accommodations are felt to be inadequate, the interacting partner may evaluate the speaker as indifferent and assess the interaction as incomplete and dissatisfying.

Prior research shows that language accommodation contributes to effective information sharing while non-accommodation can increase communication anxiety. Furthermore, customers may perceive communication in their native language as more emotional and responsive than communication in a second language. Language accommodation engages exchange partners and promotes participation in the interaction process. More importantly, by increasing perceived similarity, language accommodation leads to a favorable evaluation of the service provider (Byrne & Griffitt, 1969). Furthermore, language accommodation increases trust, satisfaction, and commitment towards the service provider, leading to the development of successful customer-firm relationships (Imamura et al., 2011). In such cases, customers participate in activities such as referral and recommendation for the service provider (Verma, Sharma, & Sheth, 2015). In contrast, language divergence may reduce customers' interactions with the service provider, which may have an adverse effect on their relationship with the service provider and word-of-mouth intentions.

Based on the above considerations, this study examines the direct effects of language divergence on responsiveness, information quality, empathy, and relationship quality. Furthermore, this study examines the mediating role of these factors in language divergence's effect on word-of-mouth intentions.

3. Sample and procedure

The present study adopts measures for positive word-of-mouth from Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist's (2014) original study. The new study adapts measurement items for information quality, empathy, responsiveness, trust, satisfaction, and commitment from previous research studies (see Appendix A), and measures language divergence using a three-item scale developed for this study. A seven-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree" measures all items. Consistent with the existing literature, the study operationalizes relationship quality as a higher-order construct consisting of three first-order constructs, which are trust, satisfaction, and commitment. Control variables are age, gender, level of education, and age of relationship.

Unlike the original study, which focuses on restaurant users in a developed country, the present study utilizes a purposive sampling

Table 1
Measurement model evaluation.

Constructs and items	λ	α	ρ	AVE
<i>Language divergence</i>				
LD1	0.85	0.88	0.93	0.81
LD2	0.94			
LD3	0.91			
<i>Information quality</i>				
IQ1	0.90	0.89	0.93	0.82
IQ2	0.90			
IQ3	0.91			
<i>Empathy</i>				
EM1	0.89	0.91	0.94	0.79
EM2	0.88			
EM3	0.90			
EM4	0.89			
<i>Responsiveness</i>				
RE1	0.89	0.83	0.90	0.75
RE2	0.88			
RE3	0.83			
<i>Relationship quality (second-order)</i>				
Trust	0.89†			
Commitment	0.88†			
Satisfaction	0.87†			
<i>Trust</i>				
TR1	0.93	0.90	0.94	0.83
TR2	0.95			
TR3	0.86			
<i>Satisfaction</i>				
SA1	0.94	0.88	0.93	0.77
SA2	0.91			
SA3	0.86			
<i>Commitment</i>				
CO1	0.91	0.85	0.91	0.81
CO2	0.90			
CO3	0.82			
<i>Positive word-of-mouth</i>				
WM1	0.92	0.83	0.89	0.75
WM2	0.92			
WM3	0.73			

† Second-order factor loadings.

approach to collect responses from 313 retail banking customers in the emerging economy of Malaysia, through a bank intercept method using a structured questionnaire. The sample consists of 54% males and 46% females. The participants are predominantly 21–40 years old (64%) with an average age of 32 years. The sample profile is similar to the original study in terms of gender and age.

Table 2
Correlations and discriminant validity.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Language divergence	0.90							
2. Information quality	0.26	0.91						
3. Empathy	0.37	0.38	0.89					
4. Responsiveness	0.24	0.59	0.56	0.91				
5. Trust	0.37	0.52	0.47	0.53	0.90			
6. Satisfaction	0.40	0.58	0.59	0.64	0.61	0.91		
7. Commitment	0.44	0.47	0.50	0.48	0.66	0.68	0.88	
8. Positive word-of-mouth	0.31	0.62	0.44	0.52	0.61	0.69	0.64	0.95
Mean	5.34	4.82	4.98	5.21	5.52	4.67	4.79	5.22
Standard deviation	1.20	1.34	1.14	1.06	1.02	1.25	1.20	1.38

Notes: Values in the diagonal are the square-root of AVE. Lower diagonal values are correlations between the factors. All correlation values are significant at p < 0.05 level.

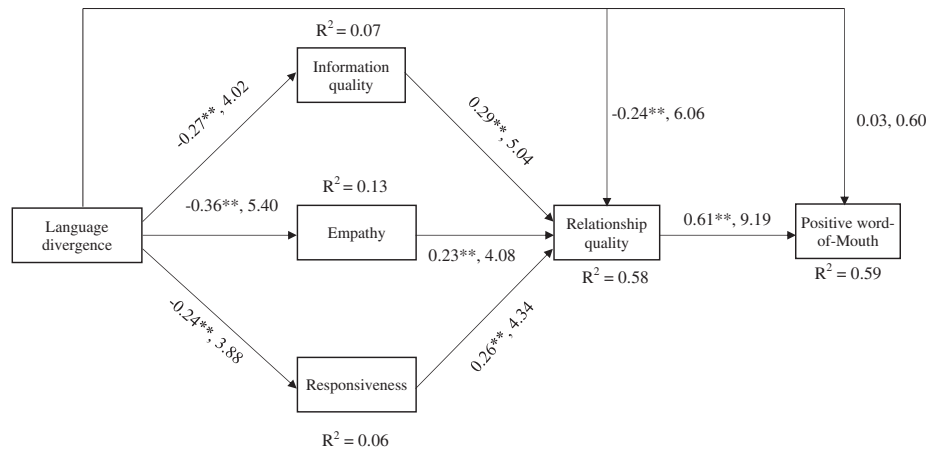


Fig. 1. Structural equation modeling results.

4. Method and findings

The study uses partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 3.0 to test the relationship between the constructs. As shown in Table 1, all constructs reflect internal consistency (average variance extracted, AVE > 0.50) and reliability (composite reliabilities, $\rho > 0.80$ and Cronbach's alpha, $\alpha > 0.70$) (Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012).

The extracted square root of the average variance for each construct exceeds its correlation shared with other constructs establishes discriminant validity (Roldán & Sánchez-Franco, 2012). Furthermore, the exogenous variables in the research model explain 58% of the variance in relationship quality and 59% of variance in positive word-of-mouth intentions, indicating good predictive validity for the research model (Table 2) (Hair et al., 2012).

Among the control variables, age ($\beta = 0.09$, $p < 0.05$) and education ($\beta = -0.07$, $p < 0.05$) have significant impacts on positive word-of-mouth. As shown in Fig. 1, language divergence has a negative direct effect on responsiveness ($\beta = -0.24$, $p < 0.01$), information quality

($\beta = -0.27$, $p < 0.01$), and empathy ($\beta = -0.36$, $p < 0.01$). The direct negative effect of language divergence on responsiveness corroborates the original study. However, language divergence shows a stronger direct effect on empathy than on responsiveness. Language divergence has an anticipated direct negative impact on relationship quality ($\beta = -0.24$, $p < 0.01$).

The indirect effect of language divergence on positive word-of-mouth through responsiveness ($\beta = -0.05$), information quality ($\beta = -0.13$), and empathy ($\beta = -0.05$) is significant (see Table 3). As the direct effect of language divergence on positive word-of-mouth is not significant ($\beta = -0.08$, $p = 0.20$), responsiveness, information quality, and empathy fully mediate the relationship between language divergence and positive word-of-mouth intentions. This provides support for the indirect effect of interaction quality in the language divergence and positive word-of-mouth relationship. Similarly, Table 3 below shows that interaction quality dimensions mediate the relationship between language divergence and relationship quality. Finally, relationship quality fully mediates the effect of language divergence on positive word-of-mouth intentions (direct effect: $\beta = 0.04$, $p = 0.45$;

Table 3 Mediation effect tests.

Mediating effect of interaction quality dimensions in language divergence and relationship quality linkage							
Total effect	Direct effect	Total indirect effect (95% CI)	Specific indirect effect				
			Information quality (95% CI)	Empathy (95% CI)	Responsiveness (95% CI)		
-0.45*	-0.20*	-0.25* (-0.34, -0.16)	-0.09 (-0.15, -0.04)	-0.08 (-0.14, -0.04)	-0.08 (-0.14, -0.04)		
Mediating effect of interaction quality dimensions in language divergence and positive word-of-mouth linkage							
Total effect	Direct effect	Total indirect effect (95% CI)	Specific indirect effect				
			Information quality (95% CI)	Empathy (95% CI)	Responsiveness (95% CI)		
-0.31*	-0.08 (ns)	-0.23* (-0.33, -0.15)	-0.13 (-0.21, -0.07)	-0.05 (0.10, -0.01)	-0.05 (0.11, -0.01)		
Mediating effect of relationship quality in language divergence and positive word-of-mouth linkage							
Total effect of language divergence on word-of-mouth		Direct effect of language divergence on word-of-mouth		Indirect effect of language divergence on word-of-mouth		Bias corrected bootstrap 95%-confidence interval	
β	t-Value	β	t-Value	Point estimate		Lower	Upper
-0.30	-5.56	0.04	0.93	Relationship quality		-0.43	-0.26

Note: Bootstrapping 95% confidence interval based on 1000 bootstrap samples.

indirect effect: $\beta = -0.35$). In summary, the results show that interaction quality and relationship quality mediate the relationship between language divergence and positive word-of-mouth.

5. Discussion, limitations, and future research

Replicating Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2014), this study demonstrates that language divergence has a negative impact on customer assessment of service interactions and relationship strength with the service provider. Particularly, customers perceive service interactions in their second language as less responsive, less informational, and less pleasant. Further, language divergence reduces customer trust in, satisfaction with, and commitment to service provider. Consequently, customers are less likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth about the service provider.

The findings of this replication study have several important implications for research and practice. First, whereas the effect of language divergence on word-of-mouth intentions is not a novelty in the literature, the findings of this study extend the generalizability of this relationship to the context of the continuously-provided service of retail banking in an emerging economy in Malaysia. Second, the findings show that empathy and information quality play more crucial roles than responsiveness in language divergence and positive word-of-mouth relationship. Unlike the original study, which only looks at the weakest link in the language divergence and positive word-of-mouth relationship, this replication study extends the understanding of the process through which language divergence impacts positive word-of-mouth.

Third, the significant relationship between language divergence and relationship quality is a noteworthy contribution to the literature. Relationship marketing literature strongly emphasizes the role of communication in the buyer-seller relationship. However, limited empirical support exists for this proposition. As language accommodation can convey greater levels of both informational and relational meaning to customers, this study shows that language divergence reduces the overall quality of customers' relationship with the service provider. The results make a significant contribution, as previous research studies emphasize the role of relationship marketing in continuously-provided services. Thus, accommodating customers' language requirements is a strategic driver of the long-term customer relationship in a continuously-provided service.

Finally, this study shows that language divergence negatively impacts positive word-of-mouth intentions through interaction quality and relationship quality. The non-significant direct path between language divergence and positive word-of-mouth intentions corroborates the findings of Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2014). However, the mediating role of interaction quality and relationship quality offers an underlying mechanism by which language divergence may affect positive word-of-mouth intentions.

Despite its aforementioned contributions, this replication study also suffers from limitations. First, future research should test these relationships in other multilingual countries and in different service industries to further explicate the circumstances under which language divergence has implications for interaction quality, relationship quality, and word-of-mouth intentions. Additionally, this study only collects data from customers. As service encounters are dyadic, future research should obtain data from both service providers and customers to better understand the role of language divergence in service encounters. Despite these limitations, this replication and extension study establishes the generalizability of language divergence's role in service encounters in a continuously-provided service of retail banking.

Appendix A

Language divergence

- LD1. The service provider often communicates in my native language.^R
- LD2. The service provider often addresses my queries/questions in my native language.^R
- LD3. The service provider often provides product/service information in my native language.^R

Responsiveness

- RE1. Shows willingness to help.
- RE2. Shows willingness to keep promises made.
- RE3. Shows willingness to assist me.

Information quality

- IQ1. Keeps me well-informed about its offerings.
- IQ2. Provides clear and accurate details of its products/services.
- IQ3. Provides sufficient information for the products/services.

Empathy

- EM1. Feel warmth in the interactions.
- EM2. Relate well with service interactions.
- EM3. Enjoy interacting with the service provider.
- EM4. Feel comfortable interacting with the service provider.

Trust

- TR1. I trust this service provider.
- TR2. I have a trustworthy perception of the service provider.
- TR3. I have confidence in the service provider.

Satisfaction

- SA1. I am satisfied with the service provider.
- SA2. I am happy with the service provider.
- SA3. I have a high-quality relationship with the service provider.

Commitment

- CO1. Committed.
- CO2. Attached.
- CO3. Obligated.

Positive word-of-mouth

- WM1. I would speak positive things about this bank.
- WM2. I would recommend this bank to my friends.
- WM3. If my friends are looking for a banking service, I would tell them to try this bank.

Notes: R – reverse coded.

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