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RESEARCH NOTE

Foreign languages in advertising: Theoretical implications for language-related IB research

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Abstract

Given the multilingual nature of global business, language influences international business (IB) in almost all areas. IB scholars have studied the complex influence of language with manifold theoretical lenses, but have not systematically integrated linguistic theories. Aiming to broaden IB's theoretical repertoire, we draw on a field that has integrated a rich array of linguistic theories with business perspectives: research on foreign languages in advertising. We review the theories linguists and advertising scholars have applied to their joint topic and apply content analysis to organize them in three theory clusters: 'language as a symbol', 'language in the mind', and 'language as means of accommodation'. These theoretical lenses provide novel insights into the meanings and mechanisms of language, which open new avenues to scrutinize the role of language in IB. For example, theories on language as a symbol may add new perspectives to research on foreignness in IB or to emerging markets research. Theories on language in the mind can explain hurdles to the strategic use of language in foreign locations and support a more sophisticated view of translation in IB. Theories on language as a means of accommodation can advance research on cross-border legitimacy and on countercultural practices in IB.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the millennium, language has grown into an essential topic of IB research (Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2014). The publication volume in this field has risen at an astonishing pace (Gaibrois, Lecomte, Boussebaa, & Sliwa, 2023; Piekkari, Gaibrois, & Johansson, 2022; Tenzer, Terjesen, & Harzing, 2017) as language came to be recognized as a social phenomenon which affects every aspect of international management (Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 2014). Whereas IB scholars' conceptualizations of language have become increasingly diverse and nuanced (e.g., Lecomte, Tenzer, & Zhang, 2018), linguists remark that theoretical models of and approaches to language in IB lag behind the state of

the art in linguistics (Karhunen, Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen, & Piekkari, 2018: 981).

In fact, linguistic theories have been underrepresented in language-related IB research despite linguistics constituting the core discipline focusing on the study of language. We argue that a deeper understanding of the meanings and mechanisms of language inspired by linguistics can promote further theory building and knowledge accumulation in language-related IB research. We therefore aim to support a more systematic integration of linguistic perspectives into the field, which several IB scholars have called for (e.g., Brannen et al., 2014; Holden & Michailova, 2014; Tenzer et al., 2017).

We do so by drawing on a field of business research that has been surprisingly disconnected from the conversation on language in the leading IB journals: research on foreign languages in advertising. The field of foreign languages in advertising has been jointly covered by linguists and business scholars, thus integrating theoretical foundations from both disciplines. As research on foreign language use in advertising has successfully applied multiple linguistic theories to a business context (Berger & Packard, 2023; Laroche, Li, Richard, & Xu, 2022), we believe that this field can provide inspiration to IB research, which equally strives to create new knowledge by bridging disciplines (Cantwell & Brannen, 2011).

We review the rich array of linguistic theories used in research on foreign languages in advertising, and distill them into three theoretical clusters. In doing so, we enrich language-related IB research with theoretical angles previously disregarded in IB. As we show in the discussion, these new lenses have the potential to advance a range of topic areas in IB.

LANGUAGE IN IB RESEARCH: IN NEED OF LINGUISTIC THEORY

Reviewing the theoretical foundations of language-related IB research, Tenzer et al. (2017) show that IB scholars have eclectically drawn on theories of culture, on the resource-based view of strategy, on economic theories or on organizational behavior theories to piece together their understanding of the complex role of language in international business. Linguistic theories, however, were comparatively neglected during the first decades of language-related IB research – despite linguistics representing an “obvious candidate” (Pudelko, Tenzer, & Harzing, 2015: 88) to enrich language-related IB research. Where IB studies did draw on

linguistics, they mostly employed linguistic relativity theory, a theory striving to explain how the semantic structure of languages shapes human thought, as Tenzer et al. (2017) noted. Although recent years have seen a rise in IB publications adopting socio- and psycholinguistic perspectives, Karhunen et al.’s (2018) criticism that IB researchers’ understanding of language fails to incorporate recent achievements from linguistics still applies today. To provide stronger theoretical foundations for their field, IB researchers with an interest in language repeatedly urged their colleagues to draw more systematically on linguistic theories (Brannen et al., 2014; Holden & Michailova, 2014; Tenzer et al., 2017). We support this agenda by reviewing and categorizing theoretical approaches to language in a field that has applied manifold linguistic theories to a business context: research on foreign languages in advertising.

FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN ADVERTISING: UNITING LINGUISTICS AND BUSINESS

There has been a long academic interest in the use and effects of foreign languages in product advertising in linguistics and marketing, in disciplines such as multilingualism, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, international advertising, and consumer research (for an overview, see Hornikx & Van Meurs, 2020). Three broad topics seem to have emerged over the years (Hornikx & Van Meurs, 2020): English in advertising worldwide, foreign languages to convey a country of origin, and ethnic languages for specific target consumers. These topics are presented below as a way of summarizing research themes in the domain of foreign languages in advertising.

The English language has been documented to be used frequently in countries on all continents where English is not the native language of consumers (see Hornikx & Van Meurs, 2020, chapter 4). For non-English speaking consumers, English has been found to evoke success and internationalness, more so than their own native language (Krishna & Ahluwalia, 2008; Lin & Wang, 2016). Some experimental studies found that English use yields better consumer evaluations for global compared to local brands (Lin & Wang, 2016; Micu & Coulter, 2010).

Researchers have also studied the use of foreign languages in their capacity to convey a country of origin (COO) (Hornikx, Van Meurs, Janssen, & Van den Heuvel, 2020). A US company may use an Italian-language slogan in its communication with

its US consumers, suggesting Italy as desired COO. Empirical research has shown that foreign languages in advertising operate and have effects similar to the explicit COO information 'made in [country]' (Hornikx & Van Meurs, 2017). Mirroring COO research on the congruence between products and countries (Usunier & Cestre, 2007), the congruence between product and *foreign language*, such as between wine and the French language, also positively influences consumer perceptions (Hornikx & Van Meurs, 2017).

Finally, researchers have analyzed the use and effects of ethnic languages, i.e., the native languages of subgroups of consumers which are different from the country's majority language. The most prominent case here is the use of Spanish for Hispanics in the USA (Luna & Peracchio, 2001, 2002).

The topics presented above have been comprehensively theorized both by researchers from linguistics and marketing, which makes research on foreign languages in advertising an ideal source for linguistic theories that can be useful to language-related IB research.

REVIEW METHODOLOGY

In our search for linguistic theories used in research on foreign languages in advertising, we retrieved relevant literature through the electronic database 'Communication Abstracts'. While any single database excludes potentially relevant outlets (in this case, international marketing journals in particular), the asset of Communication Abstracts is that it covers academic journals from fields including marketing, advertising, communication, psychology, as well as sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics. We first searched for English-language publications with 'language' and 'advertis*' in the title, abstract, and/or full paper. This search generated 998 papers, published between 1926 and November 1, 2022.

The 998 papers were manually analyzed by two coders in order to select only those papers that focused on the topic of foreign languages in advertising (and did not just happen to mention the two search terms at some point). The first coder analyzed all 998 papers on focus vs. incidental mention; a second, independent coder analyzed a random subset of 250 publications, with good intercoder reliability ($K = 0.775$, $p < 0.001$; percentage agreement: 96%). There were 11 publications which the two coders disagreed on. These were

analyzed by the two coders together, and a final decision on focus versus incidental mention was made by mutual agreement. All publications that the first coder had marked as having a focus on the topic were also discussed with the second coder, who agreed on all cases. From the initial 998 papers a total of 106 publications were found to have a focus on foreign languages in advertising (see online supplement).

Our analysis of these 106 publications proceeded in four steps that aimed to result in a limited set of coherent linguistic theories, rather than a long list of disparate linguistic theories. For this purpose, we formed clusters by categorizing theories, and grouping together those theories that were strongly related. In the first step, we listed all theories mentioned in the literature reviews of the papers that were relevant to the topic of foreign languages in advertising. Second, for each theory, we established whether it was linguistic (e.g., conceptual feature model) or not (e.g., cultivation theory). In a third step, we followed the procedures of axial coding (Boeije, 2010) to establish linkages between the remaining linguistic theories and to identify independent clusters of theories, each concentrating on a specific theoretical aspect. For instance, after 'linguistic constraints on code-switching' (grammatical criteria for the integration of foreign words in a consumer's own language), a next theory on the list was 'indexicality' (language is an index for characteristics of users). These theories had little in common, so we sorted them into two different initial clusters. Each next theory in the list was either connected to one of these clusters, or considered to be in a new cluster. For example, 'linguistic fetish' (a language utterance not used for its literal but for its symbolic meaning) was linked to indexicality because both theories point to symbolic values of languages. In the fourth and last step, we discarded all theories that stood alone without connections to other theories, even though the theory in itself might have been relevant to foreign languages in advertising. Keeping only strong clusters of theories helped us to analyze their implications for IB research in a focused manner.

RESULTS

We distilled the most important linguistic theories into three clusters: 'language as a symbol', 'language in the mind', and 'language as means of accommodation'.

Language as a Symbol

From the perspective of semiotics, which studies the use and interpretation of signs and symbols (Trifonas, 2015), foreign languages used in advertising can be said to have symbolic value, i.e., the capacity to call up associations with the country where the foreign language is typically spoken. While languages can evoke negative as well as positive associations and are always reductive (Piller, 2017), in advertising they are employed to generate positive associations.

The most prominent theoretical construct in this cluster is *linguistic fetish*, a term coined by Kelly-Holmes (2000: 71), who described it as follows: “The language appears to achieve value independently and this value is not the product of its communicative value, but rather of its symbolic value”. An example of linguistic fetish is the German-language slogan ‘Vorsprung durch Technik’ (progress through technology) used by the German car maker Audi in non-German-speaking countries. Non-German consumers are unlikely to understand the German words, but likely to associate these words with Germany and typical German product-related qualities such as engineering quality (Kelly-Holmes, 2000, 2005). The origin of linguistic fetish lies in the links between the language, country, and product. Consumers are expected to link a language to a country where that language is typically spoken, and to products that are typically produced in this country. Kelly-Holmes (2000) captures the link between products and countries in the theory of the *cultural competence hierarchy*, which “preordains [what] products particular countries are ‘permitted’ to produce” (Kelly-Holmes, 2000: 71). According to this theory, products are viewed in light of a country’s key competences. For example, style is frequently perceived as a competence of Italy (country), and therefore the Italian language (language) is appropriate to use in advertising for shoes (a product associated with style). English can also be linked to specific countries such as the UK and the US, but in the majority of cases – because of its global use – it is associated with internationalness, modernity, and success (Hornikx et al., 2020; Kelly-Holmes, 2005; Piller, 2001).

A tenet in sociolinguistics is that language users also communicate about themselves and their background (e.g., gender, culture, social class) when using language (Wodak, Johnstone, & Kerwill, 2010). Moving from individuals to products,

the theoretical work by Kelly-Holmes (2000, 2005) introduced the idea that language in product advertising communicates the origin of products by evoking the area where that language is typically spoken, and therefore, product-relevant *ethnocultural stereotypes* about the area and its inhabitants. The link between countries and products observed in sociolinguistic theory is consistent with work on the country-of-origin (COO) effect (e.g., Zeugner-Roth & Bartsch, 2020), but was developed independently. Several studies have discussed the role of the COO effect in explaining the effectiveness of foreign languages in advertising (Hornikx & Van Meurs, 2017).

The two remaining linguistic theories in this cluster are the markedness model, and indexicality. The *markedness model*, developed by Myers-Scotton (1998), argues that words in a foreign language stand out from the surrounding native language, and therefore evoke associations with that foreign language (see also Krishna & Ahluwalia, 2008). *Indexicality theory* (Silverstein, 2003) holds that linguistic phenomena are observed to occur frequently in combination with certain users, and on the basis of that link between language and users they are thought to be typical of those users. Applied to advertising (e.g., Li, 2017), this means that a foreign language utterance by definition indexes information unrelated to the referential meaning but related to connotational meanings (cf. ethnocultural associations, symbolic values). These two theories present foundational insights into the linguistic processes of foreign languages in advertising functioning as symbols.

Language in the Mind

The second theoretical cluster relates to how languages are processed in the mind. The central theories are the *revised hierarchical model* (RHM) and the *conceptual feature model* (CFM). Both theories are part of the linguistic subdiscipline of psycholinguistics, which views language as mental representation. Depending on their personal mental representation of languages, people differ in the degree to which they master these languages in terms of speaking, understanding, or writing (Dijkstra & Van Heuven, 2018). The RHM and the CFM are theories of how (foreign) languages are structured in people’s minds. They hold that a person’s first language is easier to comprehend than a foreign language (RHM), and that translation-equivalent words in a consumer’s first language and in a foreign language can have not only similar

but also dissimilar referential and connotational meanings (CFM).

According to the RHM (Kroll & Stewart, 1994; Kroll, Van Hell, Tokowicz, & Green, 2010), words have meanings because of their links to concepts in people's minds. Comprehension of a first language is better than for a foreign language because the links between words and concepts are stronger in a person's first language, and because people have a larger set of words in the mental lexicon for their first language. From the RHM, it can be predicted, for instance, that even proficient (balanced) bilingual consumers will have lower levels of comprehension of ads employing a foreign language than ads using their first language. Differences in comprehension between the first and foreign language will be even more pronounced for less proficient (unbalanced) bilingual consumers.

Where the RHM posits that the words in a person's first and second language link to concepts with varying strength, the CFM (De Groot, 1992) further specifies that the concepts may be shared by the two languages and/or may be unique to either of them. This means that for consumers, translation-equivalent words in their first language and foreign languages will always partly differ in the concepts they are linked to in the mind. As a consequence, words in different languages will have partly different meanings (see Luna & Peracchio, 2002).

These general psycholinguistic theories explain the different effects of the use of consumers' first and second language in advertising, for instance, in terms of better recall, recognition, and product evaluations for the first language (Luna & Peracchio, 2001, 2002). A theory that builds on the RHM, the *word accessibility framework*, holds that certain concepts are more accessible in one of bilingual consumers' languages than in another, for instance, family and friendship in Spanish for Hispanics in the US (Carroll & Luna, 2011).

Language as Means of Accommodation

The third and final theoretical cluster relates to language as a means of accommodation, and contains two main theories: *communication accommodation theory* (CAT) (Giles, 2016; Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991) and *acculturation* (Sam & Berry, 2010).

CAT holds that the degree to which senders adjust (accommodate) their language to the language of the receivers influences how the senders are evaluated by the receivers. Higher levels of accommodation are associated with higher evaluations. According to CAT, consumers who speak a language that is not the country's main language but who speak their own ethnic language (e.g., Chinese and Hispanics in the USA) can be predicted to react more favorably toward ads (partly) in their own rather than ads in the country's main language (cf. Bishop & Peterson, 2010; Koslow, Shamdasani, & Touchstone, 1994). These positive effects of linguistic accommodation have been linked to other, non-linguistic theories, including the similarity-attraction model (Byrne, 1971). This model holds that people are more (less) attracted to others who are more (less) similar to themselves.

A second theory that is relevant to this final cluster is acculturation, the process of an individual person's adaptation to the host culture. Individuals largely vary in the degree to which they remain attached to their own culture versus integrating into the host culture in terms of norms, values, and language (Jamal, Peñaloza, & Laroche, 2015; Sam & Berry, 2010). Although acculturation does not originate from linguistics, the subdiscipline of applied linguistics has contributed to research on acculturation because a person's degree of acculturation is strongly dependent on their linguistic proficiency in and use of the host country language. Reversely, the potential effects of accommodation of language in advertising are also conditional on the degree to which consumers are acculturated to the host country. Low-accultured consumers are expected to react more favorably towards linguistically accommodating ads using their own first language, whereas highly acculturated consumers are predicted to be more positive about ads using the host country's main language (Tsai & Li, 2012).

DISCUSSION

By clustering the linguistic theories that have been used in research on foreign languages in advertising, our review provides new lenses to scrutinize the role of language in the wider domain of IB. These theoretical perspectives have the potential to advance IB research across a range of topics. In the

following sections, we indicate examples for future research avenues in IB inspired by each theory cluster.

Language as a Symbol: Implications for IB Research

Implications for research on foreignness in IB

Linguistic theories on the symbolic value of language may advance the long-standing research stream on foreignness in IB (see Lu, Ma, & Xie, 2022 for a review). Whereas this area started by viewing foreignness as a liability for internationalizing companies (liability of foreignness – LOF) (Zaheer, 2002), recent studies have increasingly considered the possibility of foreignness being an asset under certain circumstances (AOF) (Siegel, Pyun, & Cheon, 2019). Language-related IB research has mostly focused on language *barriers* as a part of LOF, but is still to explore under which circumstances language might represent an AOF. By showing that the country associations which particular language choices call up may be negative or positive depending on ethnocultural associations and product–country (in)congruence, linguistic theory can help language-related IB research catch up with the latest research on foreignness. Under these lenses, future studies may explore how corporations can manage their foreignness in international activities through purposeful language choices. For example, a sociolinguistic approach providing deep insights into the associations particular languages evoke among particular stakeholder groups could help to investigate how firms can accentuate desirable aspects of their foreignness through foreign language display while downplaying others through local language use. Being cognizant of the symbolic value of language can help companies manage host country stakeholders' perceptions, service host-country consumer preferences or secure local government support.

Implications for research on emerging markets in IB

Emerging economies provide a particularly fruitful context to explore the implications of foreignness for multinational corporations (Lu et al., 2022), as foreign-made products and foreign firms carry a highly ambivalent symbolic value in these economies. On the one hand, emerging market consumers often perceive imported products from developed markets to be of superior quality

(Sharma, 2011) and view companies from more developed countries more favorably compared to local firms (Yildiz & Fey, 2016). On the other hand, the West has also become “synonymous with decadence, greed, and humiliation” (Hung, Li, & Belk, 2007: 1036) in markets such as China and Russia or in Arabic and African countries, feelings that often date back to partial colonization by Western powers. Research on the symbolic value of foreign language use reflects this ambivalence (Piller, 2017). Theories from this stream may explain how language choices contribute to the contradictory associations with Western products and firms in emerging markets. These linguistic lenses promise profound insights into previously unnoticed connotational meanings of corporate language use, thus helping Western decision makers to manage their firms' foreignness in emerging markets. Conversely, these approaches may reveal viable strategies for emerging market multinationals to manage stakeholder perceptions in more developed markets by downplaying their particular LOF (Marano, Tashman, & Kostova, 2017) through the use of English or local/ethnic languages.

Language in the Mind: Implications for IB Research

Implications for research on international strategies

By elucidating the limits of foreign language comprehension, linguistic perspectives on ‘language in the mind’ can advance research on the strategic role of language in the transmission of business ideas abroad. Early language-related strategy research in IB conceived of language as an instrument to optimize information flows throughout a multinational's globally dispersed activities (Luo & Shenkar, 2006). Recent IB research, however, became increasingly aware of intricate linguistic hurdles to the flow of information and knowledge between different units of global corporations (see, e.g., Reiche, Harzing, & Pudelko, 2017). Future research may draw on the *revised hierarchical model*, for example, to understand the conditions and limitations of foreign language comprehension in multilingual intra-corporate communication in greater nuance. Studies may apply the *conceptual feature model* to explore how information and knowledge can acquire different meanings when crossing linguistic divides in HQ–subsidiary or inter–subsidiary communication. Both theories

may also shed new light on the merits and limitations of BELF (Business English as a Business Lingua Franca) as a vehicle for processing knowledge and forming shared cognition in IB communication. Whereas the RHM helps to understand how this shared code may enhance foreign language comprehension by means of simplification, the CFM would introduce a cautionary note by highlighting shifting connotations and meanings.

Implications for translation research in IB

Linguistic insights about language processing in the human mind may also help to advance IB research on translation. Chidlow, Plakoyiannaki and Welch (2014) lament the continued dominance of a technicist view of translation in IB, which strives for “the conveyance of identical meaning” (Hult, Finnegan, Gonzalez-Padron, Harmacioglu, Huang, Talay, & Cavusgil, 2008: 1035) between the target and source language versions. More recently, however, several IB studies have pushed towards a more sophisticated understanding of translation (e.g., Gutierrez-Huerter, Moon, Gold, & Chapple, 2020). Highlighting the complexities of comprehension between speakers of different mother tongues, the *revised hierarchical model* and the *conceptual feature model* can support this development. Awareness of the “transformative power of translation” (Brannen et al., 2014: 501) is not only crucial for the methodology of multilingual empirical studies in IB, but also at the core of corporate translation. IB stands to gain much from theoretical advances in these areas, as “IB is literally unthinkable and impracticable without translation” (Holden & Michailova, 2014: 907).

Language as Means of Accommodation: Implications for IB Research

Implications for research on cross-border legitimacy

Linguistic perspectives on language accommodation can inform IB research on corporate legitimacy in foreign markets and subsidiaries. A growing volume of studies explores the challenges global companies encounter in establishing legitimacy among internal and external stakeholders and across multiple institutional and cultural contexts (Balogun, Fahy, & Vaara, 2019). Given that language choices at the subunit level are decisive for companies seeking legitimacy in various local environments (Luo & Shenkar, 2006), this debate

can be enriched with a linguistic perspective. Focusing on language accommodation as a legitimation strategy, future research could expand, for example, on the differentiation between cognitive and moral legitimacy in institutional theory (Balogun et al., 2019). A company enjoys *cognitive legitimacy* if its various stakeholders take its actions for granted and do not question its validity (Suchman, 1995). Language-sensitive studies could explore which foreign stakeholder groups take the use of English as a global language for granted and which groups would call English usage into question to determine which stakeholder groups require accommodation to the local language. A company has gained *moral legitimacy*, if its stakeholders consider its activities “the right thing to do” (Suchman, 1995: 579). Future research may investigate how the divergent associations different local stakeholder groups connect to English usage (internationalness, modernity, and success versus cultural imperialism and humiliation) influence a global company’s moral legitimacy and in which contexts language accommodation is imperative.

Implications for research on counter-cultural practices in IB

Challenging the long-standing assumption that global companies should adapt their practices to “fit” host country cultures, a nascent research stream in IB gathers evidence that using counter-cultural practices, i.e., practices that are seemingly incongruent with local cultural norms, can be accepted and even bring benefits in certain contexts (see Caprar, Kim, Walker, & Caligiuri, 2022 for a recent review). Considering the close association between language and culture (Tenzer, Pudelko, & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2021), non-accommodation to a local language represents a countercultural practice. In tandem with research on acculturation, language accommodation theory may help to elucidate the circumstances under which global companies might benefit from the use of such countercultural practices.

CONCLUSION

This paper has broadened IB’s theoretical repertoire with new linguistic perspectives drawn from research on foreign languages in advertising. After Piekkari et al. (2022: 160) recently observed that language-related IB research had “reached a

certain degree of maturity”, we hope that our research note will help to rejuvenate the field by opening up new avenues for studying the complex role of language in IB.

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