

The Effect of Accent of Service Employee on Customer Service Evaluation: The Role of Customer Emotions

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Abstract

In many of the developed western countries a large part of the service workforce is made up of immigrants with cultures and accents different from their adopted country. Moreover, with the propensity of firms to outsource their customer service departments to foreign call centres customers are often exposed to accents that differ from their own. This paper reports on a qualitative study designed to uncover the attitudes and perceptions of Australians to service personnel with accents different from their own. The findings revealed that hearing a service provider with a foreign accent in a call centre appears to evoke a negative predisposition to accents such as Indian or Filipino, reduce the customers' level of tolerance and increase the perception of the service provider's lack of understanding. These findings were not a common factor when customers dealt with service personnel face to face.

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Introduction

Service processes often involve social exchanges between a service employee and a customer. Numerous studies in service marketing have examined service employee attributes such as physical attractiveness, courtesy, displayed emotions. Very little research however, has examined the effect of employee accent on service evaluation. Yet, in economies such as Australia, the US, the UK, where immigrants are a large part of the service work force, service employees often have accents. For example, in Australia, the diversity in countries of birth has increased over the past 25 years (ABS 2006, 2007). Overseas immigration to Australia has brought with it a plethora of foreign languages, religions and customs that are new to and different from traditional Australian culture. In addition, many businesses have relocated business processes offshore, producing a growing impact on economies, companies, workers, and customers (Kirkegarrd 2004). This means customers increasingly interact with service providers from other cultures and with foreign accents. Customers often notice a foreign accent in these interactions. In service contexts where visual cues are absent (e.g., call centres), the accent of service providers may positively or negatively bias customer perception of service quality because accent is an important indicator of one's ethnicity, regional affiliation and social class (Lippi-Green 1994). Although research has shown that accents impact a salesperson's sales performance (Deshields, Kara and Kaynak 1996) and job interview judgement and decisions (Purkiss et al. 2006), few studies have explored the affect a foreign accent has on consumers' evaluation of a service.

Thus the purpose of this exploratory research is to extend the service literature by identifying feelings consumers may develop toward service providers with a foreign accent. Managers are better able to handle service activities and manage service personnel with accents when they are equipped with an improved understanding of the effects of accents. Therefore, the primary objective of this research is to investigate the effects of employee accent on customer service evaluation taking the customer's emotion into consideration. This paper will first provide a brief literature review on accent as one of the service employee attributes and its influences on consumers and customer emotion. Methodologies are then proposed and preliminary findings are discussed before implications and conclusions are drawn.

Literature Review

Accent stereotype

Individuals are sensitive to accents. Even when accents are subtle, individuals are still able to perceive and distinguish among different accents (Cargile 2000). Research has demonstrated that even linguistically naïve individuals can make basic distinctions among differing accents (Giles et al. 1995). However, this recognition of accent distinctiveness seems to apply only to a certain degree. Specifically, when presented with four varieties of Spanish-accented English (i.e., Cuban, Costa Rican, Argentinean, and Puerto Rican), and four varieties of Asian-accented English, most American listeners could not distinguish between the different varieties of Spanish- and Asian-accented English speech (Podberesky et al., 1990). It appears that a general Spanish accent is recognized by most listeners, and often evokes similar reactions, regardless of the specific variety of Spanish spoken.

Accents affect service evaluation via stereotyping. Stereotypes are particular types of knowledge structures or cognitive schema that link group membership to certain traits (Ford & Stangor, 1992; Nesdale & Rooney, 1990), and which have been found to influence the interpretation of others' behavior (Duncan, 1976), the memory of others (Stangor & McMillan, 1992), and behaviour toward others (Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). Prejudicial attitudes and stereotypes about race and ethnicity may be generated by multiple cues, including one's appearance or accent, triggering implicit discriminatory responses. Moreover, prejudicial attitudes affect customers' perception of the service employee. Researchers in linguistics and communication have recognized the important role of accent in the perception of individual characteristics. Accent can initiate perceptions regarding intelligence and kindness, as well as status, solidarity, economic class, national origin, or ethnicity (Lippi-Green, 1994).

Just as consumers associate certain traits of a brand or product with their country-of-origin, people attribute certain traits to certain types of accents. For example, in the U.S., French accents often are associated with sophistication, Asian accents tend to be linked with high economic and educational attainments (Cargile, 2000; Lippi-Green, 1997), and in England, the Liverpool accent is considered less cultured than accents associated with Oxford and Cambridge (Lippi-Green, 1997). For example, the positive traits are based on the prestige of the class or group that possess it (e.g., sophistication and politeness associated with British accent) (Ladegaard 1998). In contrast, people also discriminate against the speakers with foreign accents (e.g., African-American, Indian, and Mexican-American). People's general tendency to evaluate an individual's performance more harshly than others upon accent has been a persistent finding in extant literature. Accents associated with countries of lower socio-economic status and darker skin colours frequently are denigrated (Lippi-Green, 1997).

While some posit that accent is a less serious problem than not being able to understand the other person (Punch 2004), the interactive nature of service encounter often involves verbal communication between service employees and customers and thus has the potential for triggering biased judgments. Accent may be a particularly important factor affecting customers' evaluation of service performance. The accent of service providers may positively or negatively bias customer perception of service quality—especially in service contexts where visual cues are absent (e.g., call centers). Studies show that Standard English speakers are more effective and are assigned a higher status than non-standard English speakers. Accented speech correlates with lower status, causes irritation on the part of the receiver, can be mistaken for an inability to speak English (Barker and Hartel 2004), and is a source of stereotypes (Brennan and Brennan 1981). The stronger someone's accent, the worse the issue (Brennan and Brennan 1981). Although accented speech, either by a native speaker or a foreigner, may be received negatively by consumers there is evidence that hearing an accent can exacerbate a tense situation.

Investigations in English-speaking countries (e.g., the United States, Canada, Britain, and Australia), found that accents are associated with different traits (Edwards 1982). While presenters with a standard accent or dialect are perceived to exhibit more traits of (a) competence as indicated by intelligence, confidence, ambition, and industriousness, and (b) status/prestige as indicated by professionalism, presenters with nonstandard accents are perceived as having more traits of (a) personal integrity as indicated by sincerity, reliability, and generosity, and (b) social attractiveness as indicated by friendliness and warmth. Berechree and Ball (1979) noted in an Australian investigation that greater competence and social attractiveness ratings are displayed for the Cultivated Australian accent as opposed to the two other dialect varieties - Broad and General. Also, Carranza and Ryan (1975) reported

comparable results in an investigation of responses to Spanish and English presenters, where English is viewed more favourably than Spanish on the dimensions of integrity, attractiveness, and status. Additional support for these findings is noted in an investigation of speech patterns in a Canadian setting by Edwards and Jacobsen (1987), and in indigenous versus foreign-accented presenters (Ryan et al., 1977; Callan et al., 1983). Using theory of social categorization and concepts of intergroup relations and psychological distinctiveness, Garcia-Marques and Mackie (1999) obtained evidence that the speech characteristics of a person play a fundamental role in assessing, among other things, race, age, social class, profession, and way of dressing. In addition, a service employee who has an accent is often seen as someone who is more culturally distant from you than a service employee who speaks Standard English. Wang et al (2009) used two experiments and found that even with identical service outcomes, customers' perception and interpretation of their service experience changed as a function of customer service employee accent (i.e., British, Indian and American) in the call centre setting. However, biases caused by accent stereotyping decrease when relevant objective information is available (i.e., the industrial norm).

Customer Emotions

The role of affective or emotional states on decision making and consumer behaviour is well documented in the literature (e.g., Westbrook and Oliver 1991). For marketers, understanding how emotional states influence consumers in a service setting is of considerable importance. Past research suggests that there are consistent relationships between emotional states and decision process and consumption experience (e.g., Holbrook and Gardner 1993). There is also a strong relationship between emotional states and mood (Gardner 1985). Even though moods are less intense than emotions and last longer (Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer 1999), mood congruence can facilitate knowledge accessibility from memory (Dick and Basu 1994). In other words, customers in positive moods are more likely to evaluate service encounters favourably because they tend to look at the world through rose-colored glasses and see the bright side of things. Consequently, these customers tend to have a larger "zone of tolerance," accepting greater variations in service delivery (e.g., Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996).

Accordingly, it is imperative to understand the role of customer emotional states in service encounters as service delivery has the potential to evoke a variety of emotional responses such as pleasure, delight, and anger. Marketing theorists (Bagozzi et al., 1999) discuss a range of schemas and measures of emotions. For instance, Van Dolen and colleagues' (2001) study of the emotional content of critical incidents suggests that 65% of the positive emotions reported by customers were evoked by service employees. Past research indicates that the emotional state of a customer can lead to the formation of satisfaction (e.g., Arnould and Price 1993). In particular, Oliver (1993) finds that the determinants of satisfaction include positive affect (interest and joy), negative affect (anger, disgust, contempt, shame, guilt, fear, and sadness), and disconfirmation beliefs. Studies of consumers' emotional responses seem particularly relevant to negative service encounters.

The psychology literature emphasises the role of emotions as responses to environmental demands, circumstances, events and how these impact on the individual's prevailing goals and desires (Russell, 1991; Shaver et al., 1987); described in the model as 'emotional antecedents'. Based on the above discussion, we hypothesize that Australian customers are more likely to evaluate service performance favourably if an employee has an Australian accent. However, the evaluations are reversed for employees with an Indian accent.

Method

We conducted a preliminary qualitative study using in-depth interviews on customers who had experiences in dealing with service providers with accents different from the standard Australian accent. A snowball method was used to recruit a convenience sample of 12 participants: age 20-59, 7 female. Volunteers received no remuneration for their participation. These interviews followed a semi structured format. This form of interviewing is appropriate when the researcher wants to understand the experience of the research participants without restricting the nature of their responses with a fixed set of questions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Responses were analyzed using the inductive thematic analysis technique described by Boyatzis (1998).

Findings

The findings from the interviews with customers who had experienced dealing with service providers with accents that differed from their own revealed that many Australian customers have a negative predisposition to hearing accents such as Indian or Filipino. Hearing a service provider with a foreign accent appears to reduce the level of tolerance with the service response. The perceived differences in understanding may lead to feeling negative emotions, and negative experiences appear to be more common when the customer cannot see the service provider (e.g. call centre) than when they see them face to face.

When dealing with call centre based customer service departments, respondents spoke of how their attitude changed when they heard a foreign accent. As one respondent said, “...if I get an Indian accent for example, I have already got it programmed in my head where I think they are not listening to my question.” When pushed on this point respondents were at pains to say that it is not a racial prejudice but a conditioned response to the prevalence of calls from Indian telemarketers. They imagined the service personnel having a set of standard scripts to work to from which they can not deviate. “I think that they have a set format that they adhere to ... they are saying what they have been told to say.” Australian call centre staff were perceived as having a higher degree of discretion and authority to solve problems: “They [Australians] may have more ability to deal with the issue themselves and understand what I am saying.” The reduction in the zone of tolerance due to a foreign accent appears to be related to a perception that the customer service person with an accent won’t understand the caller. “Well immediately I feel some form of resistance and maybe annoyed that I’m not going to get the understanding that I want.” Hence the respondents believed that they if they are not understood, their problem cannot be fixed or they will not get what they purchased. This perception of not being able to get a satisfactory solution to their problem often lead to experiencing emotions such as frustration (with having to repeat the problem or rephrase it into simpler language) or irritation, annoyance and anger (when after trying they still do not get what they need). Respondents often spoke of being angry or frustrated with the service even before calling customer service (hence the reason for the call). A negative pre-existing mood appeared to make these customers less tolerant and more easily frustrated and annoyed. On hearing a foreign accent this negative predisposition kicked in which exasperated the negative emotions they were feeling: “I was angry to start with that they had made the error, I was frustrated with the girl on the phone, you get a sense of the impossible. Getting anything done is just impossible.” This may be associated with the previous point in that hearing a foreign accent leads to a reduction in tolerance therefore their pre-existing emotions are more easily heightened. The customer’s increase in frustration or irritation also appears

to be linked to a belief that because the service personnel have an accent they will not understand the customer and if they do they are not given any authority to deviate from the script. Although most respondents did agree that their problem had been resolved by the service person with a foreign accent they had to admit that these personnel did have to show a higher level of competence than Australian service worker to achieve the same level of satisfaction.

When respondents related their experiences of dealing with service personnel in a face to face situation the findings were much more mixed. In some situations accents were considered appropriate and added to the authenticity of the service for example "*the girl with the French accent working in the French bakery or the Indian waiter at the Indian restaurant. Those accents add to the experience.*" These findings suggest that accents appear to be a congruence cue where one part of the experience reinforces another. Yet in other situations such as taxi drivers many the same perceptions associated with foreign call centre staff, such as a of lack of understanding, prevailed.

Implications and Conclusions

Service firms that employ frontline service employees with accents need to consider the potential impact on customer satisfaction (Aron and Singh 2005). If firms fail to develop strategies for managing consumer reactions to service employee accents, they face alienating and losing customers. It is clear that while an accent is not a barrier to receiving good service the preconceived notions about the helpfulness of these customer service personnel mean that the level of competence must be higher. Perceptions of scripted responses need to be broken down. More authority or a degree of deviation from the script should be given to staff so that it differentiates responses given by customer service personnel from the perception of the scripted sales presentations of telemarketers. Because customers often only contact customer service or help lines when something has gone wrong or they need problems solved, they are already in a negative mood. This negative mood tends to fuel the negative perceptions of dealing with foreign accented customer service personnel and reduce the customer's zone of tolerance. It is therefore especially important for the foreign accented service provider to be willing to listen, show understanding and empathy with the customer's predicament rather than sticking strictly to a set script.

The research reported in this paper is the preliminary stage of a larger research project into the effect of service employee accents on customer service evaluation and the mediating or moderating role emotions have. Future research for this project will use an experimental design to test the effects of different accents, the level of perceived competence and the affect pre-existing moods have on customers' evaluation of the service. Accent will be used as a sensory cue. Research beyond this next stage should evaluate the differences between face to face and phone services as well as the impact of time, as the frontline employee –customer relationship increases.

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