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Does a foreign accent sell? The effect of foreign accents in radio commercials for congruent and non-congruent products

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Abstract

Commercials regularly feature foreign accents. This paper aims to investigate whether the use of foreign accents in radio commercials is more effective for congruent than incongruent products, and whether foreign-accented commercials are evaluated differently than non-accented commercials. In an experiment, a group of 228 Dutch participants rated non-accented and accented commercials for four different products in a between-subject design. The products were either congruent or incongruent with the foreign accent in the commercial (e.g., a German-accented commercial for sausage vs. olive oil). Foreign-accented commercials for congruent products were assessed more positively on a number of variables than foreign-accented commercials for incongruent products. Foreign-accented commercials were rated more negatively than commercials without a foreign accent.

Keywords: Foreign accent, radio commercials, product fit, persuasion, language attitudes, Language Expectancy Theory, matchup hypothesis

1. Introduction

One of the strategies that marketers can employ to advertise products is to use foreign languages and/or foreign accents in their commercials. In advertising for cosmetics, for instance, advertisers often use French phrases, whereas Italian food is frequently promoted in commercials or advertisements featuring Italian expressions. As early as the 1980s, a French cheese commercial aired in the Netherlands used a stereotypical Frenchman with a French accent in his Dutch.

Research suggests that advertisers use foreign accents and foreign languages in advertising to associate the product with favorable aspects of the country where the language or accent is spoken (Kelly-Holmes 2005: 218). In the above example, the use of a French accent is used to suggest images of French *cuisine* and *joie de vivre*. The assumption is that associations and stereotypes evoked by the language or accent transfer to the promoted product or service (e.g. Hornikx et al. 2007; ; Kelly-Holmes 2005; Mai and Hoffmann 2014; Piller 2001), which would affect consumers' attitudes towards the product and ultimately their purchase intention. This argument fits in with mainstream sociolinguistic research, which has shown that accents evoke stereotypes about the speaker's background (e.g., Bradac et al. 2001; Dragojevic et al. 2013).

1.1. Congruence between product and foreign language or accent

The literature suggests that the use of a foreign language in advertising is particularly effective when the product is congruent with the country where the language is spoken (Domzal et al. 1995; Kelly-Holmes 2005). Empirical research (Hornikx et al. 2013) has shown that the use of a

foreign language that is congruent with the product, e.g., French and wine, leads to better product attitudes and higher purchase intention than when the foreign language is incongruent with the product, e.g., French and beer. There is some evidence that the use of a foreign accent in advertising may have a similar effect. Leclerc et al. (1989) and Leclerc et al. (1994) showed that for US listeners a French pronunciation of a brand name was more effective than an English pronunciation of the same brand name for hedonic products, i.e. products which fit the cultural image that people have of France.

The matchup hypothesis (e.g. Lynch and Schuler 1994) proposes that congruence between characteristics of a spokesperson in an advertisement and attributes of the product promoted leads to more effective advertising, i.e. more favorable evaluations. Specifically, the matchup hypothesis has found support for congruence between accent and product in research investigating the effectiveness of foreign branding and foreign language use for congruent products. On the basis of the matchup hypothesis, the expectations would therefore be that the use of foreign accents works better for congruent products, which people typically associate with the country where the foreign language is spoken, than for non-congruent products.

However, there may also be disadvantages to the use of foreign accents in commercials. Although empirical research has shown that the use of a foreign *language* for congruent products is effective, and although there have been claims that the use of a foreign *accent* may be similarly effective for congruent products, which is supported by research for brand names only, other research has cast doubt on the effectiveness of the use of accents in this context.

1.2. Negative evaluations of foreign accents

Studies investigating the effect of a foreign accent in commercial contexts (advertising, sales pitches and service encounters) have shown that speakers with a foreign accent are evaluated more negatively than speakers with a native accent (e.g., DeShields and de los Santos 2000; Nejjari et al. 2012; Tsalikis et al. 1991; for an overview, see Mai and Hoffmann 2014). In the study by Tsalikis et al. (1991), for example, salespersons with a Greek accent were rated more negatively than salespersons with an American accent by American listeners. Findings that nonnative accents trigger negative evaluations are in line with findings from studies into the impact of nonnative accents in non-commercial contexts (e.g., Gluszek and Dovidio 2010; Munro and Derwing 1995).

Theoretical insights relevant to the use of foreign accents in commercials lead to negative expectations about the effectiveness of such accents. Language Expectancy Theory proposes that “[u]se of language that negatively violates societal expectations about appropriate persuasive communication behavior inhibits persuasive behavior and either results in no attitude change or changes in position opposite to that advocated by the communicator” (Burgoon and Burgoon 2001: 86). A non-native accent deviates from the native-speaker norm in pronunciation and could therefore plausibly be seen as language use that violates native listeners’ expectations about appropriate correctness and hence diminishes the persuasiveness of a text for these native-speaker judges. Specifically, Language Expectancy Theory is supported by findings showing that non-native accents are evaluated more negatively than native accents. On the basis of Language Expectancy Theory, the expectation would be that foreign-accented commercials are evaluated more negatively than their non-accented equivalents.

Consequently, our purpose was to conduct a pilot study to examine the effect of the use of a foreign accent in radio commercials for congruent and non-congruent products. The study

will investigate this specifically for commercials in the Netherlands, for listeners who have Dutch as their mother tongue.

2. Method

Dutch participants evaluated eight Dutch commercials for four products (beer, olive oil, sausage and wine). Four of these commercials were non-accented commercials, and the other four were foreign-accented. The products were either congruent or incongruent with the foreign accents in the commercials. Two products were selected which fitted France (wine) or Germany (sausage), respectively, and two products which did not fit France (beer) or Germany (olive oil).

2.1. Materials

The commercials featured four products selected on the basis of a pre-test in Hornikx et al. (2013). For each of the four products, female speakers recorded two versions of a commercial: one in standard Dutch (without a foreign accent) and one in Dutch with a French or German accent. The commercials were created by a professional voice casting agency which used professional voice actresses who regularly record commercials for Dutch national radio and television. The voice actresses were native speakers of the languages for which they recorded accented commercials, i.e. the commercials with a German accent were recorded by a German native speaker and the commercials with a French accent were recorded by a French native speaker. The text of the commercial was developed in cooperation with the voice casting agency. It was the same for all products with the exception of the specific product mentioned. In English translation, the text was as follows:

Do you want to pay the minimum but get maximum enjoyment? Our [wines, beers, sausages, olive oils] win one award after the other. Not only from experts, but also on behalf of you, the [wine, beer, sausage, olive oil] consumers, who are our primary concern. Try it for yourself: Heerders [wine, beer, sausage, olive oil], the taste for real buffs.

In a pretest, 25 participants (56% female) rated the strength of the French and German accents ('I think this speaker has a: strong foreign – no foreign accent' measured on a 7-point scale), and accent recognition ('which country is this speaker from?'). In addition, participants evaluated the speaker's style of speaking ('this speaker': 'is fluent – not fluent; has a good – bad pronunciation; has a good – bad intonation; has a good – bad pace; is convincing – not convincing'). The German speaker was considered to have a stronger accent than the French speaker. Consequently, the French-accented commercials were recorded again until they were similar in strength of accent to the German-accented commercials. The voice casting agency selected the most natural recordings in terms of pace, intonation and fluency. The mean length of the selected commercials was 26 seconds ($SD = 1.41$).

2.2. Participants

A total of 228 Dutch participants evaluated the commercials. Their average age was 31.3 ($SD = 13.8$; range 14 – 65); 62.7% were women.

2.3. Design

The study had a 2 (accent: foreign-accented, non-accented) x 4 (product: beer, olive oil, sausage, wine) between-subject design in which each participant evaluated only one commercial. The product featured was either congruent or incongruent with the foreign accent in the commercial.

2.4. Instrumentation

The participants evaluated the radio commercial in a questionnaire with 7-point semantic differentials measuring purchase intention, attitude towards the commercial, attitude towards the product, attitude towards the speaker and comprehensibility (based on Albrechtsen et al. 1980; Hornikx et al. 2013; Lalwani et al. 2005). The reliability of scales measuring these constructs was adequate or better (all α 's > .77). An English translation of the questionnaire can be found in the Appendix.

2.5. Procedure and statistical tests

The questionnaire was administered via an online tool (NetQ). Participants were randomly assigned to the different accent/product combinations. The questionnaire started with an introduction which invited participants to evaluate a radio commercial. Participants were asked to open a sound file containing one of the commercials and were then asked to give their opinion about the commercial by filling in an online questionnaire.

To determine the effect of the congruence of the product with the accent, the scores for the products that fitted the accent of the commercial were compared with the scores for the products that did not fit the accent of the commercial (German-accented sausage commercial vs. German-accented olive oil commercial; French-accented wine commercial vs. French-accented beer commercial). To correct for any product differences the scores for a product in the non-accented commercial were subtracted from the scores for the same product in the corresponding accented commercial. Differences between participants' evaluations of the commercials were analysed with multivariate ANOVAs.

3. Results

3.1. Congruence between accent and product

The first purpose of our study was to examine if congruence between the country of origin of the foreign accent and the product in the commercial affected the evaluation of foreign-accented commercials. The results of the statistical analysis revealed a difference between commercials with congruence between accent and product and commercials without such congruence. For all but one of the dependent measures, the commercials for products that fitted the language of the accent (sausage and German, wine and French) were appreciated more than the commercials in which the product did not match the language of the accent (olive oil and German, beer and French). Respondents were more likely to buy the product advertised and had a more positive attitude towards the commercial and the product. They also thought the speakers in these congruent commercials were more likeable and more competent (see Table 1).

Table 1. Evaluations of congruent and non-congruent commercials (scores are difference scores for accented commercials compared to non-accented commercials)

	congruent		non-congruent		univariate test results
	(n = 54)		(n = 57)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Purchase intention	-.40	1.51	-1.09	1.19	$F(1, 107) = 7.52, p = .007, \eta^2 = .07$
Attitude to commercial	.22	1.31	-.59	1.21	$F(1, 107) = 11.70, p = .001, \eta^2 = .10$
Attitude to product	-.15	1.23	-.90	1.26	$F(1, 107) = 9.81, p = .002, \eta^2 = .08$
Affect speaker	.26	.80	-.31	1.28	$F(1, 107) = 8.75, p = .004, \eta^2 = .08$

Competence speaker	-0.36	1.00	-0.79	1.26	$F(1, 107) = 3.97, p = .049, \eta^2 = .04$
Comprehensibility	-1.75	1.60	-2.17	1.74	not significant

3.2. Foreign accent vs. no foreign accent

The second purpose of our study was to determine if participants evaluated foreign-accented commercials more negatively than non-accented commercials. The results of the statistical analysis revealed differences between commercials with a foreign accent and those without a foreign accent. This accent effect occurred for four of the six dependent measures. The commercials in which the speaker had a German or French accent were appreciated less than the commercials in which speaker did not have a foreign accent. Participants were less likely to buy the product advertised in the foreign-accented commercials and regarded the product advertised as less attractive.. In addition, participants felt that the speakers in the foreign-accented commercial were less competent and that the foreign-accented commercials were less comprehensible (see Table 2).

Table 2. Evaluations of commercials with and without foreign accents (1= negative, 7 = positive)

	foreign accent ($n = 111$)		no foreign accent ($n = 117$)		univariate test results
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Purchase intention	2.64	1.37	3.41	1.37	$F(1,220) = 16.51, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$
Attitude to commercial	2.55	1.28	2.75	1.17	not significant
Attitude to product	2.76	1.27	3.35	1.33	$F(1,220) = 9.34, p = .003, \eta^2 = .04$

Affect speaker	4.60	1.04	4.66	0.85	not significant
Competence speaker	3.66	1.14	4.25	1.08	$F(1,220) = 14.85, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$
Comprehensibility	4.14	1.73	6.09	1.34	$F(1,220) = 95.82, p < .001, \eta^2 = .30$

4. Conclusion and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether the use of foreign accents in Dutch commercials was effective and whether congruence between product and country of the accent affected the evaluation of foreign-accented commercials.

In line with our expectations, foreign-accented commercials for congruent led to more favorable evaluations than foreign-accented commercials for non-congruent products for all but one of the dependent measures. The commercials with congruence between foreign accent and product (a German accent and sausage; a French accent and wine) resulted in better evaluations than the commercials that lacked such congruence (a German accent and olive oil; a French accent and beer) with regard to purchase intention, attitude towards the commercial and the product, sympathy for the speaker and competence of the speaker. Congruence did not affect the comprehensibility of the commercials. The favorable effect of fit between product and accent is in line with findings in Hornikx et al. (2013), who showed that fit between foreign language and product in print advertisements enhanced respondents' attitude towards the product and purchase intention and with findings in Leclerc et al. (1989; 1994), who showed that French-accented brand names for hedonic products were better liked and led to better product attitude than non-accented equivalents.

Also in line with our expectations, foreign-accented commercials were evaluated more negatively than non-accented commercials for four of the six dependent measures: purchase

intention, attitude towards the product, speaker competence and comprehensibility. Foreign-accented commercials did not differ from non-accented commercials with regard to the attitude towards the commercial and speaker affect. The findings that the use of a foreign accent in a commercial may lead to negative evaluations corroborates earlier findings both for studies investigating the evaluation of foreign accents in commercial contexts (e.g., DeShields and de los Santos 2000; Nejjari et al. 2012; Tsalikis et al. 1991) and for studies investigating the evaluation of foreign accents in non-commercial contexts (e.g., Gluszek and Dovidio 2010; Munro and Derwing 1995;).

An explanation for the finding that foreign-accented commercials resulted in more negative evaluations than non-accented commercials may be that participants regarded speakers with a foreign accent as ‘flawed’ speakers of Dutch and, hence, as less credible salespersons (cf. Tsalikis et al. 1991). This explanation is in line with research into the effect of non-native accents in foreign language learners. These studies have shown that speakers with a foreign accent are not just regarded as less comprehensible (Bent and Bradlow 2003; Munro and Derwing 1995) but also as less competent and less professional than speakers without a foreign accent (Nejjari et al. 2012). The negative effect of the foreign accent marking the speaker as less competent and as less comprehensible appears to overshadow the expected positive stereotypes that the foreign accent should evoke about the country with which the accent is typically associated. The finding that the accented commercials were less persuasive than their non-accented equivalents corroborates the Language Expectancy Theory, which claims that language use which deviates from what people expect makes a message less persuasive (Burgoon and Burgoon 2001). The fact that the accented commercials differed from the expected native-speaker pronunciation in commercials may have led the respondents to evaluate them less positively. However, the overall

negative evaluation of accented commercials seems to have been modified by a positive effect of product congruence. The finding that the accented commercials for a product that fitted the accent of the country of origin of the product led to more favorable evaluations than the accented commercials that lacked such a fit would seem to support the matchup hypothesis (e.g. Lynch and Schuler 1994). When the spokesperson's accent fits the product characteristics, this leads to increased persuasiveness.

In this study, we used monolingual ads in which the speaker spoke with a foreign accent throughout. An alternative format would be for the accented speech to occur at a strategic point in the commercial, such as in a comment at the end, which may be spoken by a different voice than the body of the commercial. The typical function of such a comment is to give "a commercial-evaluative statement about the product" (Sussex 1989: 164). Although, to our knowledge, there have been no systematic studies of where in commercials foreign accents are used, a study of Swiss commercials showed that a regional accent (Swiss German) was reserved for the body of commercials, whereas the standard German accent was used in the comment at the end of commercials (Lee, 1992). It may therefore be that a different (foreign) accent in the comment has a different impact than the use of an accent in the entire commercial. As the comment may be the most salient part of a commercial, future studies should investigate the effects of the use of foreign accents in such comments in otherwise unaccented commercials.

Theories about attitudes towards foreign languages and accents argue that such attitudes are evoked by stereotypes associated with the foreign language or accent (e.g., Dragojevic et al. 2013; Kelly-Holmes 2005). An avenue of future research might be to investigate the effect of accented versus non-accented versions in TV commercials in which the accent is supported by stereotypical images. The stereotype evoked by the foreign accent may be particularly successful

when it is supported by visual signals such as characteristic clothing (French berets and German *Lederhosen*) and landscape. Such signals were lacking from the radio commercials, which relied on the accent only to evoke the stereotypical image. Future research could also investigate if the use of a foreign accent is more successful in humorous stereotypical contexts. In the commercials in the present study, the text was not intended to be humorous. It is possible that a stereotype as evoked by a foreign accent is particularly successful in combination with humor in which the stereotype is heavily accentuated.

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Appendix

1. Buying this **product** is:

[purchase intention]

something I certainly want to do	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	something I never want to do
really something for me	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	really not something for me

2. I believe this **commercial** is:

[Attitude towards commercial]

not nice	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	nice
captivating	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	boring
not original	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	original
not attractive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	attractive
interesting	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	not interesting

[comprehensibility commercial]

comprehensible	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	not comprehensible'
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3. I believe this **product** is:

[Attitude towards product]

not nice	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	nice
captivating	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	boring
not original	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	original
not attractive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	attractive
interesting	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	not interesting

4. I believe this **speaker** is:

[Attitude towards speaker]

[Affect]

friendly	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	not friendly
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sociable	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	not sociable
good-natured	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	not good-natured
honest	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	not honest
helpful	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	not helpful
[Competence]								
intelligent	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	not intelligent
trained	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	not trained
reliable	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	not reliable
trustworthy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	not trustworthy