Linguistic racism in inter-culture service encounter

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Abstract

Purpose – Language plays an important role in a successful service exchange, but it can become a source of discrimination if one party is a non-native speaker in the host country. This study aims to examine the linguistic racism that non-native customers experience in Inter Culture Service Encounters (ICSEs) and delves into factors that contribute to the underlying psychological responses and the behavioral outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – A phenomenological approach was used where 16 individuals were interviewed to discover themes through non-native customers’ lens using an inductive process. Next, the emerged categories were classified based on extant literature, using a deductive approach.

Findings – The findings highlight the role of language varieties as a strong social identity cue for non-native customers where the associated stigma makes them see ICSE as a stereotype threat. Most importantly, these experiences shape their future behavior by avoiding direct interactions with the servers and adopting other service channels. Several “social others” influence this process.

Originality/value – This study explores the notion of linguistic racism in an ICSE from a non-native consumers’ lens and thus adds to this under-researched literature. Using a phenomenological approach, the authors propose a framework focusing on the perception of language-related stigma and discrimination experienced by non-native consumers’ along with possible behavioral responses.

Keywords Language variety, Inter-cultural service encounters, Stigma, Stereotype threat

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The worst kind of loneliness in the world is an isolation that comes from being misunderstood; it can make people lose their grasp on reality. – Sienna Brooks in The Inferno

While racism, commonly associated with race, skin color, ethnicity, nationality and even religion has been the center of attention for some time, there is another form of racism based on linguistic capabilities, referred as linguistic racism (De Costa, 2020; Dovchin, 2019, 2020a, 2020b). Linguistic racism which is perhaps equally widespread, if not more, is the unfair treatment based on an individual’s language, their accent, dialect, repertoire and speech (Dovchin, 2020a). Therefore, linguistic racism, either overt or covert, may extract a “linguistic penalty” (Zurijeta, 2019). This penalty may be manifested in a subtle discriminatory categorization as “different” or “not one of us” (Morone, 1997), or in a more evident prejudiced treatment such as access to better schooling, hiring, promotion, housing status, medical treatment and health services (Derwing, 2003; Lamberton, 2002; Link et al., 2008; Wated and Sanchez, 2006). Surprisingly, despite its prevalence and importance, there is a lack of research in linguistic racism in the marketing literature. We extend the literature by exploring the notion of linguistic racism experienced by non-native customers when they interact with service employees who may be native or just not familiar with non-native customer’s culture, referred to as Inter-Culture Service Encounters (ICSEs) (Sharma et al., 2009).

The significance of this topic is highlighted by the fact that despite the number and the purchasing power of the immigrant population (e.g. migrants, tourists, international students and workers) (Gaur et al., 2017), we observe discrimination toward them due to their linguistic varieties. For instance, Derwing’s (2003) study in Canada shows that one-third of the non-native English speakers reported discrimination based on their accent. Similarly, Goto et al. (2002) found that Chinese American respondents in California reported discriminatory experiences because of their language style. While extant research recognizes the presence of discriminatory treatment linked with the language variations due to their ability to convey one’s social identity (Rosenbaum, 2005), little attention has been given to this phenomenon in marketing literature from customers’ perspective. More recently, Hamilton et al. (2021) also urge us to explore consumer experiences in the social context.

Given the multicultural and diverse social context, the likelihood of linguistic racism is very high in ICSEs, which encourages us to see it in two unique ways. First, we explore this phenomenon through the lens of a non-native customer who carries a particular social identity cue (i.e. linguistic variety), making them vulnerable (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). Following the social process model of language attitudes (Cargile et al., 1994), linguistics research in service exchange
has primarily focused on the listeners from the native culture, evaluating and responding to speakers with language variations. However, research shows that non-native consumer’s perceptions linked to their language variety also play a vital role in the interaction process (Gluszek and Dovidio, 2010). Therefore, we flip the coin, and using the stigma approach (Goffman, 1963), explore how non-native customers see their experiences of being stigmatized. Second, exploring the non-native customers’ experience in the social context, we follow a holistic approach to identify the role of social others (Hamilton et al., 2021) that influence these customers directly or indirectly, and in turn, extract a linguistic penalty in the form of their psychological and behavioral responses.

To accomplish our goals, we rely on the phenomenological lens and use a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. First, in the literature review, we discuss the extant research and theories that help explain how the service experience of non-native customers can be influenced by the stigma associated with their language varieties. Second, using the inductive approach supported by the literature, we present a customer journey framework during ICSE through non-native customers’ lens.

**Literature review**

The idea of a linguistic penalty draws on the work of Heath and Cheung (2006), who used the term ethnic penalty to capture the disadvantages and discrimination faced by minority groups in employment. Duchêne et al. (2013) extends it to the linguistic penalty and shows that immigrant applicants are penalized during job interviews due to their weak English skills, despite their qualifications. While research acknowledges that language is the foundation of interpersonal communication (Derwing and Munro, 1997), language and its power to create inequality remains hidden till it is used as an explanation for failure of minority job candidates. Robert and Campbell’s (2006) study related to job interviews in mail delivery, supermarket work, packing jobs in factories and simple receptionist work shows that migrant candidates are more likely to fail than pass. In our study, we explore this idea of linguistic penalty in the context of ICSE, where it is rendered invisible due to complex intergroup communication but has enduring effects. We consider linguistic penalties as the negative psychological responses that non-native customers face due to the stigma attached to their language varieties. For this research, we cater to all the aspects of language that may signal one’s social identity and create hurdles for smooth and successful service communication, including language fluency, dialect, jargon, accents, vocabulary, etc., cumulatively defined as language varieties (Nordquist, 2020). Further, we will use language varieties and language styles interchangeably.

These linguistic penalties experienced by the non-native customers may be due to the social others that are in control of the service provider (e.g., linguistic servicescape, employees’ attitude) or other elements such as bad online reviews, negative word of mouth and other customers (Hamilton et al., 2021). These factors individually or collectively influence customer’s cognitive and affective responses to define their service experience (Meyer and Schwager, 2007). These factors and their influences become even more important in ICSE, where the customers and the service provider may differ in their cultures, perceptions, experiences, abilities and needs (Sharma et al., 2009; Stauss and Mang, 1999). Therefore, we argue that a holistic, dynamic, and customer-centric approach is important to advance service experience research and practice.

**Language-related stigma and customers’ expectations**

Language plays a vital role in the communication process to build relationships (Patterson, 2016); however, it can act as a barrier when it triggers one’s social identity (Derwing and Munro, 1997). Like many other social identity cues, language varieties also carry the associated stigma with them. Stigma refers to an attribute of a person which “conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context” (Crocker, 1998, p. 505). Individuals may experience this language-based stigmatization either directly, e.g. Chinese American reported their stigmatized experiences based on their accents (Goto et al., 2002), or through social others such as Disney movies that use non-native accents compared to mainstream English accents to depict negative characters such as villains (Lippi-Green, 1997).

Expectancy violation theory suggests that negative experiences, whether experienced directly or vicariously, result in a differential service expectation (Houston et al., 2018). People rarely interact with others without holding some expectation about the other person’s behavior in a specific context (Burgoon, 1993). These expectations become even more crucial in inter-cultural context because they operate as perceptual filters that influence the intergroup interaction evaluation (Houston et al., 2018). Contrary to most service jobs’ mandate of displaying positive and friendly gestures toward all customers (Pugh, 2001; Rafaei and Sutton, 1990), not all customers expect to receive it. Williams and Snuggs (1997) found that 86% of Blacks believed service providers treated them differently than Whites. In fact, mistreatment and discrimination in the service context continue to be an issue in the USA (Ainscough and Motley, 2000).

Therefore, we suggest that even before approaching the ICSE, the pervasive prejudice and stigma toward the language varieties used by non-native customers (Biernat and Dovidio, 2000) would result in perceived social distance between them and the service provider. Literature indicates that non-native speakers perceive social distance in English dominant language areas (Al-Qahtani, 2015). One might argue that language variety interferes with the communication process and creates distance between the speaker and the listener (Munro and Derwing, 2009).

However, regardless of the reason behind the communication interference, non-native speakers may strongly believe that the associated biases to their different language styles are the exclusive cause of communication obstruction (Derwing and Rossiter, 2002). Therefore, the expectation of being stigmatized based on one’s language variety would not just make non-native customers feel socially distant but see ICSE as a fearful experience and avoid it unless there is no other choice.

**Language-related stigma and stereotype threat**

Stereotype threat is defined as the activation of a negative stereotype about one’s group (Steele and Aronson, 1995) that
is not necessarily believed but merely cued (Osborne, 2001). It can occur in any context (e.g. class activities, job interviews and public speeches) in which behavior is evaluated (Aronson and McGlone, 2009; Bergeron et al., 2006). Language-related stereotypes may also activate stereotype threat (Montes-Alcalá, 2009), and people may feel less intelligent (Lindemann, 2002), incompetent (Boyd, 2003), or poor performers in school (Aronson et al., 1999; Steele, 1997). We argue that ICSE could also be seen as an evaluative social context.

To feel this threat, customers’ realization that they have a different language style, plays a crucial role in shaping their experiences as a subject of discriminatory actions (Vorauer and Kumhyr, 2001). For instance, Steele (1997) suggests that the perceived accent strength of non-native speakers is enough to signal a stereotype threat to them. As a result, once this stereotype threat is initiated, it can produce several disruptive psychological and physiological effects (Ben-Zeev et al., 2005) such as unhealthy eating behavior (Guendelman et al., 2011), agitation or dejection (Keller and Dauenheimer, 2003), lower self-esteem (Cohen and Garcia, 2005) or stress (Wated and Sanders, 2006). Therefore, we suggest that non-native customers’ perception of language-related stigma would make them consider ICSE as a stereotype threat. Most importantly, the behavior of service provider as one of the social others will be crucial at this stage by confirming or disconfirming customers’ negative expectations they have before approaching ICSE.

**Language-related stigma and the behavioral outcomes**

Woodcock et al. (2012) reason that stereotype threat is a dynamic process and its effects consequently influence an individual’s cognition and motivation (Bodniska et al., 2020). The underperformance of the stereotyped target can be seen as a general phenomenon when the group’s negative stereotype is made salient (Maass and Cadina, 2003). Applying the same within the ICSE context, we suggest that non-native customers’ stereotype threat experiences may reshape their future communication behaviors, including avoidance. Derwing (2003) shows that individuals who attribute any communication difficulties to the stereotypes attached with the language style may be more likely to avoid such conversations in the future. Similarly, Derwing and Rossiter (2002) demonstrate that individuals who perceive their accents undermining communication, avoid direct social interactions as they find such encounters more stress-provoking and resource-depleting.

Mowrer’s (1951) two-factor theory of avoidance offers some guidance on how and why people may opt to remove fear-provoking stimuli to eliminate or diminish unpleasant emotions, thereby reinforcing their avoidance behavior. Scheier et al. (1986) suggest that when people are exposed to situations where they fear they will behave inappropriately or embarrassingly because of their interpersonal skills, they try to substitute the social interaction by active use of alternative technological avenues, e.g. online socialization (Ho et al., 2015) or mobile phone text messaging rather than calling (Lee et al., 2014). Based on these, we argue that a non-native customer may engage in avoidance behavior in different ways based on their previous experiences at the focal ICSE.

Such avoidance behavior can manifest in several ways that we explore in our next section.

**Methodology**

A qualitative approach was used to explore the intricacies of the focal phenomenon. Non-native consumers were interviewed in a face-to-face setting, and the focus was their experiences at a restaurant, the ICSE in this case. To this end, semi-structured phenomenological interviews were conducted to gain insight into the interviewees’ points of view and personal experiences. This form of interviewing is appropriate when the researcher wants to understand the participants’ experience without restricting the nature of their responses with a fixed response questions (Barbosa and Fonseca, 2019; Lewis et al., 2003; Sanders, 1982; Seidman, 2006).

Based on the guidelines by phenomenological researchers, selected participants were non-native speakers whose native language is not English. The study was conducted in culturally diverse Southwest USA. Relying on the researchers’ professional and personal networks; a purposive sampling process was used to recruit 16 participants. The participants ranged from 21 to 51 years of age; 9 were male while 7 were female with a stay in the USA between 3 and 21 years (see Table 1 for the demographic details). Given the exploratory nature of this research, a small sample size is appropriate to get detailed information about interviewee’s experiences (Lewis et al., 2003; Seidman, 2006). It is also consistent with the guidelines provided by Sanders (1982) about phenomenological research and the number of participants. In our study, data saturation was achieved at the eight interview, confirming the sample’s adequacy (Seidman, 2006). However, to have more diversity of respondents from different language backgrounds, we conducted 16 interviews.

To start with, the participants were asked to share their experiences at restaurants, using the main guiding question – “How often do you go to dine-out?” Then, to add greater details, appropriate additional information was requested about the phenomenon under study by using expressions and information provided by the interviewee, with questions such as “As a non-American, how do you find living in the U.S?” “Since English is not your first language, do you face any difficulties when you go to restaurants?” followed by more question such as “Can you recall any unsatisfactory service encounters, and if so, please elaborate how and why that encounter happened?” The interviewer also used a ladderizing technique by asking probing questions at several points during the interview, such as “Why do you think (feel) that?” and “Can you explain what do you mean by that?” to uncover richer and more in-depth knowledge and meanings to their responses (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988). Given the potential for social desirability bias from the interviewees (not wanting to sound racist), care was taken to frame the research as a study of the service experiences of non-native speakers.

**Analysis**

The analysis adopted an inductive process, identifying ideas and themes from participants’ responses, subsequently classifying them according to the literature using a deductive approach (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Using the
verbatim transcripts of each interview, we identified units in the text that could represent or be an example of the concepts under study; then, through an open coding process, the agreed-upon identification and labeling of the categories were made (Davis and McGinnis, 2016). All resulting categories were compared, and the overlapping categories were merged. Next, the reported findings were compared with the relevant existing literature. Through a deductive process, emergent themes from the data were classified according to the concepts in the literature (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). Representative quotations were extracted from the interview transcripts and included for illustration and argument purposes in the following section.

Results

Our findings show that non-native customers realize that they possess a language style that is not in harmony with the standard spoken English used in the USA. Interestingly, all the interviewees had some kind of negative experiences based on their language variety; however, the severity of experience differed across all the respondents. The themes identified from the interviews and the supporting literature helped us develop an iterative and dynamic framework of non-native customers’ service experience focusing on linguistic racism. Figure 1 highlights the overarching framework that captures a non-native customers’ service experience and the social others influencing their affective and cognitive responses that play an important role in defining the subsequent interaction (Hofmann et al., 2008). The three building blocks of our framework explaining the ICSE through the lens of non-native customers include: I. Pre ICSE – Perceived stigmatization; II. During ICSE – Affective and Cognitive responses (Confirmation/Disconfirmation); and III. Post-ICSE Decision (Avoidance/Possible Alternatives).

Pre-ICSE – perceived stigmatization

Research on stigma focuses on the social-cognitive approach to understand how people link different experiences to build and strengthen stigmatized beliefs (Hebl and Dovidio, 2005). However, its focus on non-native speakers’ experiences based on their language varieties is somewhat limited (Giuszek and Dovidio, 2010). Therefore, our findings help us to highlight social others that build non-native customers’ expectations of language-related stigmatization, including sociopolitical factors and interpersonal history:

Sociopolitical factors

In this study, broader sociopolitical factors include the prevailing attitudes or norms toward immigrants or non-native speakers that may be evident through the political situation, institutional policies or media. Together, these may contribute to a greater predisposition toward perceived social distance (Taylor and Simard, 1975). Dailey et al. (2005) suggest that sociopolitical factors do affect social interactions. For instance, recent hate crimes against Asian Americans in the post COVID-19 situation affected minority members in several ways because they could identify themselves with these incidents, as expressed by Interviewee 10 and 11:

[...] there is so much negativity around us, I avoided going out by myself for a while [...] (Interviewee 10, China)

[...] media is talking about one discriminatory incident; they are not done by it, and we hear another one and the process goes on [...] (Interviewee 11, Mexico)

The constant influx of such incidents may prepare these individuals to be victims of any discriminatory experience anytime, as mentioned by Interviewees 1 and 13:

[...] The divide and hatred between the followers of the two main political parties of the U.S are so strong and obvious that it does not surprise me if I face any kind of discrimination [...] when people ridicule me by mentioning the Chinese virus, I do not feel surprised [...] whether it is a restaurant or any other place, I am always mentally prepared for anything [...] (Interviewee 1, China) [...] Haven’t you seen the viral video of a girl in Farmington Hills where a McDonald’s employee mocked her accent? This is crazy [...] where is this country going? [...] I think in the last couple of years, I have become more conscious of how others are going to treat me [...]” (Interviewee 13, Mexico)

Therefore, our findings reveal that one need not go through a discriminatory experience themselves; identifying themselves with someone else facing such a situation might be enough to

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expect a similar stigma and create a feeling of social distance. This could be seen as referent-based stigmatization.

**Interpersonal history**

It refers to one’s own past personal interactions with the host country’s natives. Literature suggests that previous experiences may systematically influence attitudes, perceptions, and expectations between the speaker and the listener (Cargile et al., 1994; Gallois et al., 2005). As expressed by Interviewee 15:

> [...] In school, my classmates would make fun of my Chinese friend when he would make a presentation. Once I saw a paper circulating in the class which had some shapes and comments on it, mocking him. I thought they would be doing the same with me [...] (Interviewee 15, Vietnam)

These daily interactions and experiences become part of one’s belief system and attitudes that influence how they approach future conversations (Gallois et al., 2005), they become more conscious about individuals from majority groups, judging and evaluating them stereotypically (Vorauer, 2006). Interviewees 2 and 5 shared episodes when they felt ridiculed due to their accent:

> [...] One of my American friends once said, your pronunciation of ‘T’ sounds like the opening of a bottle cork. I do not know whether he meant it or not, but it really made me conscious afterward [...] (Interviewee 2, India)

> “ [...] The stand-up comedians and the social media influencers make hilarious videos about accents of people from different regions [...] initially I enjoyed them too, but after experiencing few incidents, now I feel these videos also spread a bias [...] people do not understand the difference between mockery and humor [...]” (Interviewee 5, India)

These responses show that if non-native customers’ prior interactions with native speakers are negative, they may expect the same unpleasant experience in future interactions.

**Discussion**

In summary, these sociopolitical and interpersonal factors, individually or collectively, create expectations before approaching the ICSE. These make customers more aware of their language as a negative social identity and its associated biases (Cargile et al., 1994; Derwing, 2003). They may act in two ways in creating the perception of social distance in non-native customers’ mind: first, people realize that they have a language style of a particular group that activates certain stereotypes in the listeners’ mind (MacIntyre and Charos, 1996); second, the widespread discriminatory experiences make them feel vulnerable, and they expect to be a victim of such a situation too. This may create a feeling of social distance and anticipation of threat in their interaction with the native speakers even before they reach ICSE. Depending on the severity of these feelings, a non-native consumer may decide to go through the ICSE or use alternative mode to fulfill their need.

**During ICSE – stereotype threat**

Once the non-native consumer enters the ICSE, he/she comes in direct or indirect contact with several social others such as the service employee, elements of servicescape and other customers. Consistent with the literature on stereotype threat (Steele, 1997), our findings show that the language-related stigma seems to signal a stereotype threat for non-native customers. This threat is evident through their expressed psychological responses (Derwing, 2003). We were able to identify intergroup anxiety and lack of social belonging as two primary psychological responses reported by the interviewees.
Intergroup anxiety

Defined as a type of anxiety people experience when they anticipate or engage in an intergroup interaction (Stephan, 2014). It arises from the fear of verbal or non-verbal interactions with strangers or relative strangers (Manning and Ray, 1993; Schlenker and Leary, 1982) with the prospect of evaluation in social situations (Schlenker and Leary, 1982). Sevinc and Dewaele (2018) demonstrate that anxiety due to language barriers can occur in various situations and contexts, and ICSE is one of those. During ICSE, the non-native customers might get the attention, interpersonal evaluation, or judgment by the service provider or the others surrounding them, causing intergroup anxiety (Inzlicht and Good, 2006).

Interviewee 10 expressed it while recalling her restaurant experiences as:

[...] There were moments when I just wanted to be invisible [...] (Interviewee 10, China)

An informant described the anxiety during ICSE by linking her service encounters to the one-on-one experience with the English-speaking examiner during an English language exam:

[...] I joke with my family that sometimes it reminds me of my English-speaking section of the IELTS exam that I took before coming to the U. S [...] (Interviewee 2, India)

Such anxiety experiences in intergroup interactions are found in several contexts. Dewaele et al. (2008) and Blakely et al. (2017) examined multilingual and Latino American immigrants in different situations and found that respondents reported a significantly high level of anxiety when speaking with strangers, at work, on the phone, and in public. Their feeling of anxiety is also manifested through their physiological responses such as blushing and stammering (Woodrow, 2006).

Interviewees 4 and 3 shared their anxiety experiences during service encounters at the restaurants as:

[...] I asked her ketchup (ketchup), and she rolled her eyes and asked, what? I again said ketchup. She was quite irritated. And then I pointed my finger toward the rack where I could see the ketchup. The couple standing next to me was also seeing all this. My heart was pounding. At that moment [...] I could not understand where I went wrong [...] I still remember that I was planning to eat there, but I brought the food home [...] (Interviewee 4, Vietnamese)

[...] While waiting in the queue, with every step that I take toward the service counter, I feel my heartbeat gets a little faster [...] I might not be right, but I sense that everyone is just looking at me [...] once I receive my order, I feel as if the mission is accomplished [...] (Interviewee 3, Italian)

Our findings show that when language acts as a strong identity cue of being an out-group member, it can trigger feelings of depression and anxiety (Lueck and Wilson, 2010). This is consistent with the basic assumptions of intergroup communication theories, including; Anxiety and Uncertainty Management (AUM) and Integrated Threat Theory (ITT) (Gudykunst, 2005; Stephan and Stephan, 1985). Specifically, AUM suggests that people experience some level of anxiety with language playing a major role in intercultural adjustment. Similarly, ITT suggests that out-group individuals feel personally threatened causing intergroup anxiety during intergroup communication.

Therefore, our findings explain the role of social others at the ICSE (e.g. service employees, servicescape and other customers) that may lead to an affective response of intergroup anxiety, especially when the non-native consumers come in with pre-conceived fear of stigmatization.

Lack of social belonging

During social interactions, individuals are often motivated to feel a sense of belonging (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). With the limited attention given to the unique relationship of non-native speakers and their feeling of social belongingness (Rogan et al., 2006), it was quite interesting to see several interviewees highlighted this connection. Consistent with the literature that stereotype threat undermines target’s sense of belonging (Murphy and Zirkel, 2015; Walton and Cohen, 2007), our respondents expressed their feeling of lack of social belongingness based on their restaurant experiences as:

[...] We are not aliens or belong to some other planet [...] (Interviewee 1, China)

In the same vein, Interviewee 7 took a long-term view and stressed the negative feelings and confusion about being different from the majority members by summarizing his past experiences in the context of restaurant services as:

[...] It has been now 7 years that I moved to the U.S. I visit Nepal every 2 years for a few days. So, U.S. is practically my home now, but I do not feel it that way; I cannot call it home. Sometimes I feel, it is just in my mind, but then the reactions are so obvious that I cannot ignore them [...] (Interviewee 7, Nepal)

Communication literature also shows that non-native speakers’ perceptions of their language differences may relate to their feelings of social belonging (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). For instance, accent strength may lead speakers to think whether they are accepted in a community or not (Skachkova, 2007). Inzlicht and Good (2006) showed similar findings that perceptions and experiences of bias linked to communicative problems might lead speakers to feel that they do not fully belong to the USA. These speakers start considering them as outsiders to the community, eventually questioning their social belonging (Gluszek and Dovidio, 2010). In recalling their interactions with the servers that made them feel lack of social belonging, Interviewees 9 and 5 expressed:

[...] Why don’t they think that something normal and routine for them might be new for us? In Pakistan, we do not use the term soda for drinks, but I learned to use it when I came to the U.S. So, it should be OK [...] I have observed when they are serving American customers, they have a smile on their faces [...] at times they would start talking about some funny subject. When it is my turn, if I ask the same question twice, first the smile is gone, and then the conversation is to the point [...] (Interviewee 9, Pakistan)

[...] She asked me about water before taking the order. I said plain water. She served me a glass of water with much ice in it. When I mentioned that I asked for plain water [...] initially, she was a bit surprised what I am asking for; I clarified that I want water without ice. She rolled her eyes as if I am stupid and walked away to grab another glass of water, saying, ‘regular water’. [...] (Interviewee 5, India)

Hence, lack of social belongingness may emerge as a cognitive response among non-native customers during ICSE in the presence of social others (e.g. service employees, servicescape elements and other customers), especially when the non-native consumers come in with pre-conceived fear of stigmatization.

Discussion

These feelings experienced during any service exchange may vary depending upon the features of the situation (Stephan, 2014). In ICSE, these features in the form of social others carry a strong potential to convert the negative expectation into a
positive one and decrease the perceived social distance in non-native customer’s mind or vice versa. Research suggests that customers do not evaluate customer–employee interactions in an absolute sense; instead, they compare the perception about the service they receive with their *a priori* expectations (Oliver, 1981; Parasuraman et al., 1985). Therefore, if the customer expects stereotype threat, the non-accommodating behavior of the server would be interpreted as confirmation of this expectation. As discussed earlier, the congruence between the customers’ negative expectations and the servers’ non-accommodating signals evoke negative and stressful responses. However, the accommodating behavior toward the same customer may alleviate the negative responses or reverse customers’ expectations to a comfortable and joyful experience, eventually shrinking the perceived social distance. Interviewee 1 expressed it by linking his classroom experiences with the servers’ accommodating body language as:

[...] Just a smiling face, and you feel good. You know [...] when you are making a presentation in the class, you try to find that person in the audience who nods his head because it makes you feel comfortable and confident. I think it works everywhere [...] (Interviewee 1, Chinese)

Similarly, Interviewee 6 recalled her ICSE experience as:

[...] I have certain allergies, so I have to be very careful when I order my food [...] I asked her one question in two different ways. She probably sensed that I am feeling uneasy. Before asking the third time, she immediately took her phone out and Googled to confirm what exactly I was asking for. She showed me the picture before placing the order. She was very nice to me. I felt so good that I paid her more tip than I usually do [...] (Interviewee 6, Chinese)

Another important element of social others at this stage is the servicescape (Harris and Ezeh, 2008; Hooper et al., 2013). Lack of sensitivity to appropriate use of servicescape in the form of linguistic symbols can lead to an attribution of discrimination towards the targeted ethnic group (Touchstone et al., 2017). However, appropriate and accommodating servicescape may not just reverse the results but can play a significant role in influencing customer satisfaction and quality perception (Reimer and Kuehn, 2005). Further, such servicescape cues are particularly more important for some consumer segments such as consumers with disabilities (Menzel Baker et al., 2007) and gay consumers (Rosenbaum, 2005). These cues make them feel welcomed by the service provider; as Interviewee 16 reported, “they put mithai (traditional sweet) for everyone at the counter on Eid.” Such actions help create a feeling of “place-identity” where consumers may feel that they belong (Hall, 2008). Similarly, in the context of ICSE, servicescape may include a menu with different language options, easy-to-follow signage, technology-mediated interface, uncontroversial historical or cultural pictures, etc. Use of such accommodating servicescapes may help lessen the negative elicited responses and expectations of the non-native customers. Interviewee 9 shared her views which indirectly supports our suggestion:

[...] There is a house nearby which has a welcome sign in its garden. It has one statement written in English, Spanish, Mandarin, and Arabic, which says, [...] “Whatever language you speak, I welcome you as my neighbor”. [...] It might be a tiny thing for others, but whenever I see it, I feel very good. Someday, I really want to see the owners of the house [...] (Interviewee 9, Pakistan)

Thus, our findings show that social others can not only reinforce non-native customers’ negative expectations in ICSE, they can also mitigate negative pre-conceived fears.

### Post-ICSE – decision (avoidance/possible alternatives)

The intergroup interactions have both immediate and far-reaching influences (Gallosi et al., 2005). What people experience today later becomes part of their past experiences and beliefs, and influences how they approach future conversations (Gallosi et al., 2005) to reduce the likelihood of negative experiences (Gudykunst, 2005; Vorauer, 2013). Avoidance is one of such behavioral outcomes (Stephan and Stephan, 1985). Our analysis of the respondents’ experiences helped us find some ways of avoiding social others in ICSE.

#### Family and friend’s support

We found that friends and family play an important role in helping focal customers avoid coming in direct contact with the server, if needed. Interviewees 14 and 2 mentioned that:

[...] I prefer to go out with my roommate. He is an American and a very nice guy. He understands my concern [...] (Interviewee 14, China) “[...] I have given this job to my boyfriend. When I am with him, he would always place an order for me [...]” (Interviewee 2, India)

In their book, Dolan and Kahneman (2014) suggest that instead of agonizing over things that make us feel miserable, we should find an optimal balance between pleasure and purpose. They argue that in a restaurant, delegating the choice decision to those who know you well can conserve your energy and make you feel happy. Likewise, seeking friends and family support during ICSE to save oneself from the previous stressful situations happening again can also make the service experience enjoyable. Similar sentiments were expressed by Interviewee 8, recalling his experience of Valentine’s dinner:

[...] My neighbor asked me that why you are taking your kids with you. This is your special day. My wife smiled and said if we go without them, we will get the opposite of what we want. My kids were born here, so their English is like American people [...] (Interviewee 8, Thailand)

Hence, taking the help of friends and family could be one way to avoid direct interaction with the server. However, it is important to mention that some might not feel comfortable asking for this kind of help for the very same reason they would ask for such help.

#### Technology-mediated support

Different technological devices could also be used to avoid face-to-face interaction with the social others at ICSE. In line with Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2017), we found that non-native customers do prefer to use technology-mediated avenues as an avoidance mechanism from direct interaction:

[...] It is better to use apps, that way you get what you want [...] (Interviewee 15, Vietnam)

[...] there are several services these days, I personally use Doordash [...] It is not always the case, but why ruin to your mood [...] make your life stress-free [...] (Interviewee 11, Mexico)

Social response theory helps explain how these technological channels may offer an opportunity to alleviate non-native customers’ negative psychological responses (Moon, 2000). People tend to treat these devices as social actors even when they know that machines do not possess feelings, intentions, “selves”, or human motivations (Reeves and Nass, 1996). More importantly, when people fear that their interpersonal skills do not reach the required standard (Scheier et al., 1986), they try to substitute the social interaction with the use of an...
alternative technological channel, e.g. going for text messaging rather than calling (Lee et al., 2014).

Therefore, the presence of technology-mediated support gives these customers a way to shun any situation where they expect social embarrassment. Similar service experience was shared by the interviewee 12:

[... I look for kiosks first. I usually explore everything in the menu due to certain dietary restrictions [...], and then I have a habit of adding or removing items in the cart several times. I cannot do this with the person at the counter [...], with kiosks I do not have to tolerate his nasty looks or [...] the pressure of other customers judging me and giving me frustrating looks because they have to wait. [... ] (Interviewee 12, China)

These are in accordance with the literature, which emphasizes that technology can be used as a substitute for human interaction, and non-native customers may be inclined to use technology-mediated services to avoid negative ICSE. As summed up by Interviewee 12:

[... why to bear unnecessary stress when you have the way to avoid it [... ] (Interviewee 12, China)

Discussion

In addition, we were also able to find the problem-solving theme. For instance, some try to improve their communication skills rather than blaming other external factors, as suggested by Interviewees 4 and 8:

[... Once I told my husband the whole incident, he helped me to improve my pronunciation of ketchup [... ] (Interviewee 4, Vietnam)

[... You would laugh, but I honestly memorized few phrases that are used more often. When I searched on the internet to improve my basic English, I was surprised that there are websites where you can learn commonly used sentences in places like grocery store, restaurant, post office. Then I thought it is not just me; several people must be facing the same [... ] (Interviewee 8, Thailand)

However, even after spending many years in a host country and achieving near-perfect control over the host country’s language features, people still retain the phonology (including intonation) of their native language (Derwing and Munro, 1997; Moyer, 2004). Therefore, it is not clear as to what extent customers’ efforts to improve their language skills help them remove the stereotype threat and make the service experience comfortable. Further, while we have presented our framework as a customer flow with a feedback loop, it is possible that at any stage, the customer may move back to their earlier stage. For example, a customer may move between the technology-mediated interface and the server depending upon the availability of the technological devices and the level of comfort they feel, as reported by Interviewee 3:

[... After COVID 19, I started using the drive-thru. I thought it would save me. But it was tougher [... ] I could feel the irritation in the voice of the server. The added pressure of people waiting in their cars behind me made it more difficult [... ] a couple of times, I did not get what I ordered. My husband asked me to make a complaint [... ] (Interviewee 3, Italy)

Caveats

In addition to our overall findings, it is also important to highlight a few associated caveats that emerged in this study. The proposed framework may not apply to the non-native customers who are emotionally strong and confident enough to speak in a second language (Clément et al., 2003). These non-native customers understand that they are the ones paying for the value proposition and are willing to ensure that they get what they are paying for. As Interviewee 13 suggested:

[...] I do not care if the server does not understand me. I pay for it, so I make sure that he/she understands what I want. [...] (Interviewee 13, Mexico)

Similarly, culturally competent customers who are well-traveled and have exposure to many cultures may also handle the ICSE differently, as explained by Interviewee 16:

Traveling different parts of the world and meeting culturally diverse people has helped me to remove these barriers. Travelling has given me much confidence. [...] (Interviewee 16, Bangladesh)

Conclusion

This paper offers some interesting insights into the service experience of non-native customers by shedding light on the stigma associated with language variety (e.g. linguistic racism) in an ICSE. Using a phenomenological approach, this study finds that both the service-controlled social others at the ICSE (service providers or employees, servicescape and other customers) and the factors not directly associated with ICSE (sociopolitical situation and interpersonal history) can extract linguistic penalties as non-native consumer’s affective and cognitive responses. Language styles and their influences on native listeners in services marketing have been explored in the extant literature (DeShields and de los Santos, 2000; Rao Hill and Tombs, 2011) and found to result in some psychological responses (Tombs and Rao Hill, 2011). This study adds to this somewhat sparse literature by exploring how the non-native speakers take the language-related stigma as a strong social identity cue, especially in the era where they find widespread discrimination around them. On the one hand, we find that this realization of the stigma makes them see ICSE as a stereotype threat. On the other hand, the same social others can shrink the perceived social distance and mitigate the perception of the threat once used in accommodating ways.

The notion of language-related stigma has several practical implications for consumer behavior literature. The customers’ realization of the stigma associated with their linguistic varieties provides insights into the underlying causes for seemingly commonplace behaviors. For instance, the use of technology is mostly looked at from the convenience perspective; yet it may be seen as an accommodating mechanism to save vulnerable consumers from stressful situations. From the service providers’ perspective, there exists a possibility that the usage of a technology-mediated interface, even if used as an avoiding strategy, could eventually increase the average ticket size. The CEO of McDonald, Steve Easterbrook, recently told CNBC:

[...] what we are finding is when people dwell more, they select more. The extra time spent on self-service kiosks is translating to a larger average spend compared with the traditional checkout method (Garcia, 2018).

Moreover, our findings suggest that non-native consumers’ responses in ICSE are inextricably tied to the verbal and non-verbal communication of the service provider. Therefore, proper training to the frontline service employees to effectively communicate with such customers by understanding their vulnerabilities and showing empathy can bring lasting effects. The interaction comfort resulting from the accommodating verbal and non-verbal communication can result in several final service outcomes such as customer satisfaction, retail patronage and positive word of mouth, to name a few. Last but not the
least, service provider may also consider other aspects of servicescape to bring a feeling of inclusion for non-native customers. One way to welcome customers from all backgrounds would be to provide menu options in several languages and placing signages and pictures that are easy to understand. Another option would be to use the notion of smell as part of servicescape, e.g. vanilla scent is proven to have the ability to reduce anxiety and therefore mitigate the stereotype threat effect, influencing purchase intention in a positive manner (Lee et al., 2011).

One final note regarding limitations and suggestions for future research. This study primarily uses an exploratory approach, evaluating a phenomenon still not explored, and demonstrating the topic that deserves further attention from researchers. Although the number of participants was appropriate in methodological terms and data saturation was reached, further studies are needed to validate our findings using quantitative techniques on this extremely crucial human topic. The participants in this study were non-native consumers based in Southwest USA; we recommend that future researchers explore the customers’ experiences in other parts of the USA as well as in other countries. In addition, we encourage researchers to take one step further and investigate the facilitating role of the pictorial representation of the items in the menu, availability of menu in different languages aided by Artificial Intelligence (AI), and provision of technology-mediated interfaces (e.g. kiosks) on non-native customers’ choice, satisfaction and average sales revenue. We expect that non-native customers’ reliance on kiosks or technology-enabled servers can also potentially increase the positive outcomes. Similarly, looking into the future where technology is likely to play a major role in our day-to-day lives, we urge the researchers to examine the role of AI in mitigating the perception of linguistic racism and associated penalties. For instance, instead of non-native customers struggling with the possibility of anticipated stigmatization, it may be possible to ascertain their native language and then display the menu in the respective language and let them order via a mobile device. Lastly, we want to emphasize that the psychological responses under stereotype threat conditions may also be interlinked. For instance, anxiety experiences may cause feelings of social exclusion or not belonging to the majority of social groups (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Therefore, future researchers are encouraged to explore if during ICSE these psychological responses are inter-linked or is there any causal relation between them. We hope that this study provides an impetus for more research in this crucial area of inter-cultural service encounters and helps create a better world for all members of humankind by addressing covert racism rooted in the language.

References


Linguistic racism

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