



**HAL**  
open science

# The Language Backfire Effect: How Frontline Employees Decrease Customer Satisfaction through Language Use

J. Holmqvist, Y. van Vaerenbergh, R. Lunardo, M. Dahlén

## ► To cite this version:

J. Holmqvist, Y. van Vaerenbergh, R. Lunardo, M. Dahlén. The Language Backfire Effect: How Frontline Employees Decrease Customer Satisfaction through Language Use: .. Journal of Retailing, 2019. hal-03421794

**HAL Id: hal-03421794**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03421794>**

Submitted on 20 Dec 2021

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**The Language Backfire Effect: How Frontline Employees Decrease Customer  
Satisfaction through Language Use**

**Jonas Holmqvist**

*(Corresponding author)*

Kedge Business School  
680 cours de la Libération,  
33400 Talence, France  
jonas.holmqvist@kedgebs.com

**Yves Van Vaerenbergh**

Katholieke Universiteit Leuven,  
Warmoesberg 26,  
1000 Brussels, Belgium  
(yves.vanvaerenbergh@kuleuven.be)

**Renaud Lunardo**

Kedge Business School  
680 cours de la Libération,  
33400 Talence, France  
renaud.lunardo@kedgebs.com

**Micael Dahlén**

Stockholm School of Economics  
Sveavägen 65  
11383 Stockholm, Sweden

[micael.dahlen@hhs.se](mailto:micael.dahlen@hhs.se)

# **The Language Backfire Effect: How Frontline Employees Decrease Customer Satisfaction through Language Use**

Extant marketing research holds that customers prefer frontline personnel to speak the customers' first language. Furthermore, current managerial practices instruct frontline employees to either use the customers' first language or, in international settings, to use English. Through five studies in different retail and service contexts, we identify situations where the opposite is true. The results of the first two studies suggest that if customers initiate contact in a second language, the frontline employee's switch to the customer's first language constitutes an identity threat leading customers to feel less satisfied; an effect we term the language backfire effect. Our third study extends these results to a domestic context to test for the impact of linguistic acculturation on how immigrant customers perceive frontline employees' language switch. The fourth study replicates the findings in a real-life retail context. These results present a paradox for marketing research: although frontline employees switch to customers' first language to accommodate them, these actions might not have the desired consequences. Having identified and described the problem of the language backfire effect, our final study introduces and verifies a managerially actionable solution: combining the language switch with a language proficiency compliment offsets the language backfire effect.

**Keywords:** frontline employees; language; organizational frontline; identity threat; satisfaction

During the past decade, frontline employees in retailing and service contexts are confronted with an increasingly diverse customer base. This diversity stems from two sources. First, worldwide market liberalization and fewer travel restrictions created a significant increase in international trade and tourism (Kotabe and Kothari 2016). Hence, frontline employees are increasingly serving international customers and tourists. Second, changing demographics in many countries as a result of immigration and growth of certain ethnic groups (e.g. Hispanics in the U.S.) contribute to more diversity (e.g. Brumbaugh and Rosa 2009). Managers concerned with the future of frontline retail management should not only consider the role of technological innovations and data availability (Grewal, Roggeveen and Nordfäldt, 2017), but also consider how they will serve a changing customer base.

Interactions between frontline employees and customers with different backgrounds are oftentimes complicated, as they may not always speak the same language (Holmqvist and Grönroos 2012). In these situations, three options exist. The employee accommodates the customer and speaks the customer's language; the customer accommodates the employee and speaks the employee's language; or both switch to a lingua franca (i.e. a third language they both speak but that is different from both first languages, these days often English; Crystal 2003). The vast majority of both marketing and sociolinguistic literature recommends switching to the customer's first language or at least to a lingua franca. Customers generally prefer to interact in their first language (e.g. Holmqvist 2011) and hold more favorable attitudes toward persons who show efforts to speak their first language or a language in which they feel more comfortable (Genesee and Bourhis 1988). Interestingly, employees tend to switch to the language in which a customer feels more comfortable, regardless of the language in which the customer initially addressed the employee (Callahan 2006).

To further illustrate this situation, we followed Otterbring, Ringler, Sirianni, and Gustafsson's (2018) approach to start with an initial study to gather preconceptions about the

research topic. We sampled 231 US respondents (41% female,  $M_{\text{Age}} = 37$ ) on MTurk to ask how they thought customers would respond to a frontline service employee switching to the customers' first language. Half the respondents answered about bilingual customers (e.g. Hispanics in the U.S.), the other half answered about a tourism context for international customers (e.g. tourists who order at a restaurant in the local language). Respondents were asked about their expectations of how the customer would rate this experience. Respondents thought a language switch would positively affect satisfaction, both in the retail context ( $M_{\text{Switch}} = 7.62$ ,  $M_{\text{No switch}} = 6.82$ ,  $t = 3.07$ ,  $p < .01$ ; 10-point Likert-type satisfaction scale anchored by 1 = "Completely disagree" to 10 = "Completely agree") and in the tourism context ( $M_{\text{Switch}} = 7.60$ ,  $M_{\text{No switch}} = 6.57$ ,  $t = 4.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Hence, people generally expect customers to react favorably to a language switch.

The purpose of this paper is to challenge conventional wisdom, current managerial practices, and the extant literature on language use by proposing that there are situations in which customers do *not* want to be served in their first language. Both international customers and domestic customers in multilingual countries may prefer to speak a second language for several reasons<sup>1</sup>, such as wanting to fit in (Muziani 2006), avoid being seen as outsiders or immigrants in a new country (Krishnan and Berry 1992), or because they want to practice their second language (Clément, Baker, and MacIntyre 2003). Customers starting an interaction in a second language may consider themselves sufficiently competent in that language and thus be motivated to complete the interaction in that language. These customers

---

<sup>1</sup> The results of a pilot study with 127 adults (40% female,  $M_{\text{age}}=38$ ) from the US (85) and Asia (42) who frequently visit other countries shows that 31% had tried to speak the local language when abroad. Of these, a majority (52%) had experienced a language switch from the frontline service person. These results support the notion that customers may want to interact in their second language, and that a language switch can be quite common. We believe that these results are even somewhat conservative, as we ran it with speakers of some of the world's most spoken languages (English, Mandarin) who often can get service in their own languages when abroad.

might react negatively to a frontline employee switching to their first language or a lingua franca.

Our research is intended to meet three key objectives. First, we establish that customer satisfaction decreases when frontline employees – despite having good intentions - switch to the customer’s first language, which we refer to as the language backfire effect. We demonstrate this effect for switches both to a first language and to a lingua franca, across different languages and retail contexts, and for interactions with both international customers (e.g. tourists in Paris) and domestic customers (e.g. Hispanics in the U.S.). Second, we identify the process underlying the language backfire effect. Building on self-determination theory, we demonstrate that customers perceive the language switch to as a threat to their identity. In so doing, we provide quantitative support for the relationship between language and identity, hitherto approached predominantly from a qualitative perspective (Heller 2003; Jenks 2013). Finally, we identify a means by which the language backfire effect may be offset: we demonstrate that providing identity-reinforcing information in the form of a compliment about the customer’s language skills attenuates the negative consequences associated with a language switch.

Our research contributes to the literature by empirically demonstrating the negative consequences of switching language during service encounters. This contribution is in marked contrast with both intuition and current literature on the role of language in organizational frontlines (e.g. Holmqvist, Van Vaerenbergh and Grönroos 2017).

## **Theoretical Background**

### *Customer Perceptions of Frontline Employee’s Language Use*

Service encounters are at the core of services as dyadic interactions between customers and frontline employees (Surprenant and Solomon 1987). Communication between the

customer and the frontline employee is a crucial part of the service (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996). While the effects of language use on consumers in text processing have been extensively studied (e.g. Krishna and Ahluwalia 2008; Luna and Peracchio 2005), current marketing research long ignored situations in which customers actively interact with frontline employees in a second language (Holmqvist and Grönroos 2012). In the last decade, however, several studies on customers' language preferences in different service contexts have appeared, all arguing that customers prefer using their first language. For example, Callahan (2006) posit that service employees change to the customer's language to accommodate the customer, Holmqvist (2011) shows that customers generally prefer service in their first language across four language groups.

Studies examining language in service encounters typically build upon speech accommodation theory, positing that if one person converges to (diverges from) the other person's first language, the other person develops more favorable (unfavorable) impressions of the person who converges (diverges) (Giles, Taylor, and Bourhis 1973). This speech accommodation theory perspective on interactions between people who do not share the same language received support in marketing studies; Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2013) show that customers are more likely to tip if the service provider speaks the customer's first language. Later studies show that customers are less likely to spread positive word-of-mouth if the service provider does not serve customers in their first language (Balaji, Roy, and Lassar 2017; Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist 2014).

In this paper, we posit instead that customers react favorably when being served in the language they *want* to speak, not necessarily their first language. While the importance of speaking one's first language is likely to be high in many contexts, there might also be situations where customers are motivated to use their second language. When individuals visit a foreign country or a region where another language is predominant, they often want to "go



local” and blend in with the local population (Muzaini 2006). Speaking the local language is a way to do so. By speaking the local language, customers may feel that they fit in, and avoid standing out by being identified as foreigners (Krishnan and Berry 1992). Another possible reason for wanting to speak the local language is that customers may have studied the language as a second language, but seldom have the opportunity to use it. This situation presents a second incentive for customers to use a second language, as they might enjoy speaking it and feel good about themselves when able to carry out an interaction in a second language (Clément et al. 2003), or even want to show off by displaying their language skills (Kraak and Holmqvist 2017).

Hence, there might be situations in which customers’ normal preference for their first language is replaced by a desire to use a second language. Building on research suggesting that customers sometime may want to speak a second language (Clément et al. 2003), we hypothesize that customers may feel less satisfied when met with a response in their first language after starting an interaction with the employee in their second language.

**H1.** Frontline employee language switch (versus no switch) leads to a decrease in satisfaction when the customer initiates an interaction in their second language.

### *Self-Determination Theory as Theoretical Anchor*

In this paper, we build on self-determination theory (SDT) as a framework for investigating the effects of a language switch in service encounters. SDT posits that individuals continuously strive to satisfy the three complementary basic psychological needs for autonomy (Deci 1975), competence (Harter 1978) and relatedness (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Satisfying these needs leads to positive outcomes, such as perceptions of personal success and control of outcomes. Even more important, satisfaction of these needs is essential for many identity aspects, including integration, social development and personal well-being

(Luyckx et al. 2009; Ryan and Deci 2000). On the other hand, if the needs for autonomy and competence are threatened, this threat leads to negative outcomes, such as decreased intrinsic motivation and poorer problem solving (Deci and Ryan 2000).

Building on this understanding of SDT, we posit that customers served in their first language after initiating contact in a second language may perceive this language switch as a threat to their needs for autonomy and competence, resulting in negative outcomes. This proposition is based on the notion that, as indicated by SDT, autonomy and competence constitute suitable components of identity, which when questioned may be experienced as an identity threat, given that language proficiency forms an integral part of people's sense of identity (Baker 2009).

Customers might thus feel that the language switch shows a lack of consideration for their efforts to speak the local language, and even interpret it as a negative evaluation of their language skills. Given that wanting to appear intelligent is one of the reasons for wanting to speak a foreign language (Lim and Bowers 1991), the language switch may even be seen by some customers as a judgement of their overall capacities. Indeed, in a social environment, research identifies individuals' beliefs about how others see them as an identity threat (Leary and Baumeister 2000). When individuals' social identity is viewed stereotypically or negatively, they will experience social identity threat, resulting in negative consequences. Since a switch by the frontline employee from the local language to customers' first language may be seen as a negative judgement of the customer's abilities to communicate in the local language, customers could perceive the switch as an identity threat. Consumers display negative reactions when they feel that their self-image is questioned (Claus et al. 2012), and this questioning of their self-image can result in an identity threat (Gao, Wheeler and Shiv 2009). Hence, it may be likely that the identity threat felt by customers following the employee language switch results in lower satisfaction. We hypothesize:

**H2.** Frontline employee language switch (versus no switch) leads to an increase in customer's perceived identity threat.

**H3.** The customer's perceived identity threat mediates the effect of the language switch on satisfaction.

### *Acculturation*

We propose that the language backfire effect occurs for both international customers wanting to speak the local language (e.g. tourists visiting Paris) and for domestic customers wanting to speak the dominant language of the region. Drawing upon extant research, we posit that this motivation to speak the local language may be particularly relevant for immigrant customers as well as for customers belonging to minority groups. For immigrants, language and ethnicity can influence consumer acculturation to the new market (Peñaloza 1994). As acculturation refers to immigrants becoming more integrated in their new country, sometimes to the point of not wanting to be identified with their original country (Berry and Krishnan 1992), we believe acculturation, and particularly *linguistic* acculturation (Marin et al. 1987), to be an important part of immigrants' language preferences. Given the close link between acculturation and identity, examining whether the language backfire effect occurs for highly linguistically acculturated customers might provide additional support for the identity-related process underlying this effect.

Although consumers belonging to immigrant groups also might react positively to advertising directed to them in their first language, this may not always be the case. Koslow, Shamdasani, and Touchstone (1994) found that advertisement in Spanish to Spanish speakers in the US could even lead to decreased affect toward the advertisement. Part of the reason for this effect, as shown by Berry and Krishnan's (1992) study of acculturation among Indian immigrants to the US, is that some consumers might perceive that the use of their first

language serves as an unwelcome sign of their being different. As immigrant customers become more integrated and more acculturated in their new country, they may not want to constantly be reminded that they are different. In other words, customers who consider themselves highly acculturated might perceive a switch from the local language to their first language as a sign that they do not yet fully master the local language, and hence are not yet fully integrated. Conversely, the link between local language skills and identity might be less strong for less linguistically acculturated customers (Laroche et al. 2003). These customers might consider the switch from the local language to their first language less as an identity threat, and hence react less negatively in terms of customer satisfaction.

Building on these studies in the field of customer acculturation, we hypothesize that the more linguistically acculturated immigrants and minority customers are to the dominant culture, the stronger the identity threat following a language switch and the more negative the reaction to the frontline service employee's language switch will be. We hypothesize:

**H4.** Acculturation moderates the influence of frontline employee language switch on identity threat, so that the more linguistically acculturated immigrant customers are, the stronger the negative effect of language switch on identity threat will be.

#### *Attenuating the language backfire effect through language proficiency compliments*

Last, in order to deal with the consequences of a language switch, we posit that a compliment about the customer's second language skills may offset the language backfire effect. As customers perceive the switch from the second to the first language as an identity threat, providing positive feedback about their second language skills in the form of a compliment may attenuate the negative reactions. A compliment refers to a positive appraisal of assessable attributes or characteristics (Golato 2005). Speakers of different languages sometimes give

language proficiency compliments, especially to people who are perceived to be learning a language or have not yet completely mastered a language (Jenks 2013).

Research on self-determination theory shows that positive feedback – such as a compliment - satisfies people’s need for competence, and hence triggers positive reactions (Hagger, Koch, and Chatzisarantis 2015). This observation connects with studies in linguistics, showing that language proficiency compliments enable people to construct their linguistic identity (Jenks 2013). In this sense, customers receiving a compliment for their language skills also receive affirmation that they are competent in their second language. Hence, we expect that a language switch accompanied by a compliment attenuates the language backfire effect. Against this backdrop, we hypothesize:

**H5.** The effect of a language switch on (5a) identity threat and (5b) customer satisfaction is offset when the language switch is accompanied by a language proficiency compliment.

### **Overview of Studies**

Our five hypotheses lead to a conceptual framework outlined in Figure 1. We carried out a series of experiments using a wide range of samples and contexts to test this framework. Studies 1 and 2 establish the backfire effect by testing the impact of a frontline employee language switch on satisfaction. Study 2 further examines the potential mediating role of identity threat on the effect of frontline employee language switch on customer satisfaction. Study 3 replicates the previous studies in a domestic setting and further explores the moderating role of linguistic acculturation on the effect of frontline employees’ language switch. Study 4 again replicates these findings in a real-life setting with customers who recently experienced a language switch. Finally, Study 5 shows that complementing the

language switch with a language proficiency compliment may offset the negative consequences associated with a language switch<sup>2</sup>.

---Insert Figure 1 about here---

## **Study 1: Language Switch and Satisfaction**

### *Procedure and Sample*

Eighty-nine Scandinavian adults (57% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 28.88$ ,  $SD = 13.12$ ) participated in a two-group scenario-based experiment. All participants were native Swedish speakers, either from Sweden or from Finland. Only respondents who reported speaking at least some French and English were included, as a basic knowledge of both languages was required for the study. The respondents are thus native Swedish speakers who are conversational in English and have at least a rudimentary knowledge of French.

In this first study, we wanted to test the effects of the language switch in a situation where the frontline service employee switches to a neutral lingua franca, which today usually means using English as a language of international communication (Jenks 2013). The study tests how Scandinavian customers trying to speak French while on holiday in France react to a language switch to English. The conversation of the scenario replicates an actual situation we observed in a Parisian café: we observed a customer who kept talking in perfectly understandable French albeit with an accent, while the French waiter insisted on using English. While both of them kept polite, the customer's frustration at the waiter's language switch was obvious. The scenario is as close to a word-by-word replication of the

---

<sup>2</sup> As fluent bilinguals can more easily activate both languages than less fluent bilinguals (Beauvillain and Grainger, 1987), customer reactions to the language switch might be influenced by proficiency. We tested customers' perceptions of their fluency in the local language as a covariate to the analyses in all studies. Given that all conclusions drawn from the analyses reported in the set of studies remain stable when including or excluding the covariate and given recent recommendations to use covariates sparsely (Becker et al., 2016), we report the results without covariates.

conversation as we could retrieve from our notes. Both versions of the scenario were read by native French speakers fluent in English to make sure that there was no change in tone between the two scenarios.

The participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. All participants read a scenario where they imagined themselves visiting Paris and going to a café. The waiter addresses the customer in French, and the Scandinavian customer responds in French, the local language. The waiter subsequently responds in French (condition 1) or in English, the lingua franca (condition 2). A short conversation follows and exactly the same phrases are said in both scenarios.

After reading the scenario and evaluating some filler items, participants reported their overall satisfaction with the service ( $\alpha = .89$ ) on a three-item seven-point scale adopted from Maxham and Netemeyer (2002). A sample item is: “I am satisfied with the overall experience I had in this place”. They then rated their language skills on several seven-point scales. The respondents indicate feeling much more comfortable speaking English ( $M = 6.33, SD = 1.06$ ) than French ( $M = 3.19, SD = 1.49, t(88) = 18.20, p < .001$ ), they speak English more frequently ( $M = 4.79, SD = 1.66$ ) than they speak French ( $M = 1.80, SD = 1.31, t(88) = 15.45, p < .001$ ) and read more English texts ( $M = 5.75, SD = 1.31$ ) than they read French texts ( $M = 2.06, SD = 1.18, t(88) = 21.92, p < .001$ ). The sample is thus suited for a study on whether customers feel less satisfied when being answered by a service provider in their stronger language, a lingua franca, after initiating conversation in the local language. Finally, we adopted Van Vaerenbergh, Vermeir, and Larivière’s (2013) two-item seven-point Likert scale measure of scenario realism ( $\alpha = .86$ ): ‘This scenario seems realistic’ and ‘What happens in the scenario could also happen in real life’. Participants considered the scenarios as realistic ( $M = 6.34, SD = .87$ ).

## *Results and Discussion*

Table 1 lists the means and standard deviations for each experimental condition. An independent-samples t-test ( $t(87) = 8.41, p < .001, r = -.67$ ) reveals that customers who are served in French feel more satisfied ( $M = 5.62$ ) than customers served in English ( $M = 3.77$ ). These results support our first hypothesis. Since Study 1 indicates that customers being served in their stronger language, an international lingua franca, feel less satisfied, the next study is designed to replicate this finding for customers experiencing a switch to their first language, and also tests whether identity threat might explain the customer dissatisfaction.

---Insert Table 1 about here---

### **Study 2: Testing the mediating effect of identity threat**

#### *Procedure and Sample*

One-hundred and twenty French adults (46% female,  $M_{age} = 31.68, SD = 13.28$ ) participated in a two-group between-subjects experiment and were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions of language switch (language switch versus control). Respondents were recruited by research assistants, who administered the survey in a major French city. Before participating, the respondents were asked whether they knew English, as a basic knowledge of this language was required for the study. All respondents were native French speakers who reported at least a basic knowledge of English.

Participants were asked to imagine they are tourists visiting London. After some sightseeing, they visit a restaurant where the waiter addresses them in English, the local language, and the customer responds in the same language. In the control condition, the waiter continues in English and a short basic conversation takes place in English. In the language switch condition, the waiter switches language after the respondent's first phrase in English, and the waiter then continues the conversation in French. French is a compulsory subject in



British schools, and approximately 23% of the British population reports being conversational in French (Eurostat 2012). This observation increases the realism of the scenario as many London waiters would have at least some knowledge of French.

Exactly the same things are said in both scenarios, the language in which it is said is the only difference. Both versions were read through by native French speakers fluent in English to make sure that there was no change in tone between the scenarios. The English spoken by the customer is grammatically and lexically correct, though slightly literary to better reflect how many people speak a second language they learned in school. In order to increase scenario realism, both scenarios start with a short description of how the respondent arrives in London and goes to visit some famous landmarks of the city. The restaurant in which the interaction takes place looks nice, the food tastes well and the price is moderate, in order to isolate the language effect.

After reading the scenario, respondents were first asked some filler questions about the restaurant and their experiences in London in order to ensure that they did not perceive the questionnaire to be about the language spoken by the service employee. Next, the respondents rated their satisfaction using the same scale as in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .81$ ). We also administered a 7-item identity threat scale ( $\alpha = .81$ ) adapted from Aquino and Douglas (2003): ‘The waiter doubts my English skills’, ‘The waiter believes I am not capable of speaking English’, ‘The waiter believes my English is good’, ‘The waiter judged me in an unjust matter’, ‘The waiter did something to make me look bad’, ‘This waiter questioned my English skills’, ‘This waiter regarded me in a negative manner’. We also measured participants’ fluency in English using a single-item measure ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 2.00$ ). Participants also evaluated scenario realism using the same scale as in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .82$ ); the scenarios were evaluated as realistic ( $M = 6.24$ ,  $SD = .94$ ). All items were measured on a seven-point scale.

## *Results*

An independent-samples t-test (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics) reveals that participants served in their second language felt more satisfied ( $M = 5.60$ ) than participants served in their first language ( $M = 5.08$ ,  $t(118) = 2.57$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $r = -.23$ ). These results bring further support for Hypothesis 1. Next, we performed a mediation analysis to test the mediating role of identity threat in the frontline employee language switch-satisfaction relationship (see Table 2). Using the Process macro (Model 4; Hayes 2017) with a bootstrapping procedure (5,000 samples), the language switch condition was included as the independent variable (0 = no switch, 1 = switch), identity threat as the mediator and satisfaction as the dependent variable. Results revealed that the language switch leads to an increase in identity threat ( $\beta = 1.68$ ,  $t(118) = 7.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which in turn decreases customer satisfaction ( $\beta = -.38$ ,  $t(117) = -5.55$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As the relationship between the language switch and satisfaction becomes not significant ( $p > .05$ ), identity threat acts as a full mediator (Indirect:  $-.64$ , 95% CI =  $-1.00$ ;  $-.38$ ). These findings support Hypotheses 2 and 3.

---Insert Table 2 about here---

## *Discussion*

The results of Study 2 provide further support for the idea that a language switch by a frontline employee can lead to a decrease in satisfaction, even if the frontline employee switches from the customer's second language to the customer's first language. Moreover, Study 2 shows that customers react negatively to a language switch as they perceive the switch as an identity threat. While Studies 1 and 2 provide support for the language backfire effect, they both focus on situations where the customer visits another country. To test whether the language backfire effect also occurs in domestic interactions, Study 3 tests the language backfire effect using a sample of Hispanic Americans who initiate an interaction

with a service provider in English within the U.S. In addition, we also assess how the degree of acculturation, specifically linguistic acculturation, influences their reactions to a language switch.

### **Study 3: Language switch among acculturated customers**

#### *Procedure and sample*

Two-hundred and eleven Hispanics living in the United States were recruited through an online panelist (Prolific). Only Hispanic Americans were recruited. We excluded ten participants reporting a first language different than Spanish, leading to a final sample of 201 participants (41% female,  $M_{\text{Age}} = 33.18$ ,  $SD = 10.75$ ). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: no language switch versus language switch. Participants were asked to read a scenario, which manipulated the language switch by a frontline service employee. The scenario depicted a situation where a Hispanic American visits a friend in New York. When arriving in the city center, the person still has two hours before meeting her/his friend and decides to enter a restaurant. The waiter approaches and greets the customer in English. The participant responds using the same language. Next, we manipulated the language switch. In the no-switch condition, the waiter continued the conversation in English. In the language switch condition, the waiter switched to Spanish<sup>3</sup>.

After reading the scenario, participants were asked to complete the same measures of satisfaction ( $\alpha = .77$ ) and identity threat ( $\alpha = .93$ ) as in Studies 1 and 2. They also completed the Short Acculturation Scale for Hispanics developed by Marin et al. (1987). This 12-item scale was preferred over more recent acculturation scales due its development for the specific purpose of testing acculturation of Hispanics in the United States. Relying on the criteria of

---

<sup>3</sup> In this study, we also contrasted a language switch to perfect Spanish with a language switch to Spanish with an American English accent. As both conditions produced similar results, we aggregated both conditions and only report results for the language switch versus no language switch conditions. Detailed results with the conditions broken out are available from the authors upon request.

Eigenvalues higher than one (Hair et al. 2005), a factor analysis using a Varimax rotation supported the original tridimensional structure of the scale. We reproduced the three initial factors of ‘language use’ ( $\alpha = .87$ ), ‘media’ ( $\alpha = .83$ ), and ‘ethnic social relations’ ( $\alpha = .73$ ; see Appendix E for the items). We also measured participants’ fluency in English ( $M = 5.69$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ) using the same item as in Study 2. Finally, we measured scenario realism ( $\alpha = .74$ ) using the same scale as in Study 1 ( $M = 5.08$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ). All items were measured on a seven-point scale.

### *Results*

An independent-samples t-test (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics) reveals that customers exposed to a language switch from the frontline employee are less satisfied ( $M = 5.03$ ) than customers not exposed to a language switch ( $M = 5.48$ ,  $t(199) = 2.65$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = -.18$ ). This result brings further support to Hypothesis 1. Next, a mediation analysis (Process, Model 4, 5000 bootstrap samples, Hayes 2017) using language switch as the independent variable, identity threat as the mediating variable, and satisfaction as the dependent variable (see Table 2) revealed a significant indirect effect of language switch on satisfaction through identity threat (Indirect:  $-.42$ , 95% CI  $[-.63; -.25]$ ). A language switch leads to an increase in identity threat ( $\beta = 1.35$ ,  $t = 5.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which in turn decreases satisfaction ( $\beta = -.31$ ,  $t = -6.71$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As the direct effect of language switch on satisfaction while controlling for identity threat was not significant ( $p > .05$ ), identity threat acts as a full mediator of this relationship. These findings support Hypotheses 2 and 3.

Turning to the hypothesized moderating role of linguistic acculturation, we ran a regression using language switch as the independent variable, identity threat as the dependent variable and linguistic acculturation as the moderating variable. The results did not reveal main effects of language switch ( $\beta = -1.20$ ,  $t = -1.44$ ,  $p > .10$ ) and linguistic acculturation ( $\beta =$

.08,  $t = .48$ ,  $p > .10$ ), yet a significant interaction emerged ( $\beta = .59$ ,  $t = 2.95$ ,  $p < .01$ ). We graph this interaction in Figure 2 using the Johnson–Neyman technique for identifying regions in the range of the moderator variable in which the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable is and is not significant (Hayes and Matthes 2009). The Johnson–Neyman point for  $p < .05$  for the linguistic acculturation as a moderator occurs at a value of 2.99. This point indicates that a language switch results in significantly higher levels of identity threat than an absence of switch for all values of linguistic acculturation above 2.99. These results support Hypothesis 4: the more linguistically acculturated people are, the more they perceive a language switch as an identity threat.

---Insert Figure 2 about here---

In order to test the robustness of this effect, we ran two similar regressions using the other dimensions of acculturation as moderating variables (media, and ethnic social relations). None of the interaction terms between the two other dimensions and language switch were significant ( $\beta_{Media \times Switch} = .09$ ,  $t = .42$ ,  $p > .10$ ;  $\beta_{Ethnic \times Switch} = -.06$ ,  $t = -.37$ ,  $p > .10$ ). These findings suggest that only the language use dimension of acculturation moderates the effect of language switch on identity threat.

Next, we analyzed if linguistic acculturation also moderates the mediating effect of identity threat in the relationship between a language switch and customer satisfaction. We ran a moderated mediation analysis using Process (Model 7; Hayes 2017), using the same procedure as previously but with linguistic acculturation as the moderator. Results revealed a significant index of moderated mediation (Indirect:  $-.19$ , 95% CI =  $-.37$ ;  $-.04$ ), indicating that the mediating effect of identity threat is a function of linguistic acculturation. The mediating effect of identity threat becomes stronger as linguistic acculturation increases: the indirect effect was not observed when linguistic acculturation was low ( $-1$  S.D.; Indirect:  $-.18$ , S.E. =

.10, 95% CI = -.43; .00) but emerged when linguistic acculturation was high (+1 S.D.; Indirect: -.59, S.E. = .14, 95% CI = -.92; -.35).

### *Discussion*

Replicating the findings in Studies 1 and 2, customers who face a language switch perceive greater identity threat and are less satisfied than those who are addressed in the local language. In addition, we show that linguistically more acculturated customers respond more negatively to a language switch than those who are less linguistically acculturated. These findings provide additional support for the identity-related process underlying the language backfire effect.

Up to this point, we have demonstrated the negative consequences of a frontline service employee switching language if the customer initiates contact in the local language using scenario-based experiments. This approach increases internal validity but at the cost of external validity. To address this concern, Study 4 tests the language backfire effect and the mediating role of perceived identity threat using actual customer experiences. Although not hypothesized, we also examine whether a language switch affects customer reactions beyond satisfaction and test the effect of the language switch on return intentions and word-of-mouth intentions. Finding an effect on this set of variables using a sample of customers who actually experienced a language switch would provide stronger evidence for the language backfire effect.

### **Study 4: Replicating the language backfire effect using actual customer experiences**

#### *Procedure and sample*

In order to test how having experienced a language switch in real life influenced customers, we contacted foreign exchange students who had spent the autumn at a French business

school. The study was conducted in the form of a recall study. This approach is considered as a suitable way to study customers' language use in real life contexts (Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist 2013). We only included exchange students who had been in France during the semester prior to the survey to make sure that we would tap into recent experiences. All the respondents recalled interactions no further back than a maximum of three months, thus well within the commonly used six-month frame for recalling interactions with frontline employees (e.g. Liao 2007).

One-hundred and one exchange students participated in the survey. Fifty-eight respondents who had never tried speaking French to a frontline employee were thanked for their willingness to participate but not included in the final sample. The remaining 43 respondents (65% female,  $M_{Age} = 27$ ) had tried to speak French with a frontline employee in a retail or service setting. Respondents who had experienced one or several retail interactions with a language switch were asked to recall one of those experiences. Respondents who had managed the entire interaction in French were in turn asked to recall that situation. Twenty-one respondents reported that the employee had switched to English while 22 reported having managed the entire interaction in French<sup>4</sup>.

Respondents were asked to write down the conditions surrounding this event and describe as vividly as possible their feelings and thoughts regarding the interaction. Next, respondents reported their satisfaction ( $\alpha = .84$ ) using the same scale as in our previous studies. We also measured their return intentions ( $\alpha = .84$ ) and positive word-of-mouth intentions ( $\alpha = .96$ ) using two three-item scales adopted from Maxham and Netemeyer (2002; sample items: "If I have the option, I will gladly return to this place in the future" and "I will recommend this place to my friends"). Participants also completed the same measure of identity threat ( $\alpha = .77$ ) as in Studies 2 and 3. Similar to Study 1, we also asked questions about respondents'

---

<sup>4</sup> While this sample might seem small, an a priori sample size calculation using G\*Power 3.0 (Faul et al. 2007), and using a statistical power of .80, an alpha-level of .05 and the average effect size across the three previous studies (satisfaction:  $r = -.36$ ) as input, returns a recommended sample size of 43.

language skills. The respondents indicate feeling much more comfortable speaking English ( $M = 6.00$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ) than French ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ,  $t(41) = 5.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ), they speak English more frequently ( $M = 6.00$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ) than they speak French ( $M = 4.23$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ,  $t(42) = 4.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and read more English texts ( $M = 6.07$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ) than they read French texts ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ,  $t(42) = 7.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, participants provided demographic information.

### *Results*

Independent-samples t-tests show that customers who had experienced a language switch reported lower satisfaction ( $M_{\text{Switch}} = 4.40$ ,  $M_{\text{No Switch}} = 5.71$ ,  $t(41) = 2.87$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = -.41$ ), lower return intentions ( $M_{\text{Switch}} = 3.89$ ,  $M_{\text{No Switch}} = 5.85$ ,  $t(41) = 5.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = -.63$ ), and lower word-of-mouth intentions ( $M_{\text{Switch}} = 3.87$ ,  $M_{\text{No Switch}} = 5.45$ ,  $t(41) = 3.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = -.49$ ) than respondents who did not experience a language switch. These findings support Hypothesis 1. A mediation analysis using Process (Model 4, 5000 bootstrap samples, Hayes 2017) supports the mediating role of identity threat in the language switch-satisfaction relationship (Indirect:  $-1.80$ , 95% CI =  $-2.93$  ;  $-.97$ ). As in previous studies, the frontline employee language switch increases identity threat ( $\beta = 1.70$ ,  $t = 5.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which in turn decreases satisfaction ( $\beta = -1.06$ ,  $t = -6.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The direct effect of language switch on satisfaction was non-significant ( $p > .10$ ). Hence, identity threat acts as a full mediator of this relationship. These findings support Hypotheses 2 and 3.

We obtained similar findings for return intentions and word-of-mouth intentions. A frontline employee language switch has a significant indirect effect on return intentions (Indirect:  $-1.14$ , 95% CI =  $-2.08$  ;  $-.48$ ) and word-of-mouth intentions (Indirect:  $-1.24$ , 95% CI =  $-2.23$  ;  $-.53$ ). The perceived identity threat caused by the language switch ( $\beta = 1.70$ ,  $t = 5.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ) decreases return intentions ( $\beta = -0.67$ ,  $t = 4.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and word-of-mouth



intentions ( $\beta = -0.74, t = 3.70, p < .01$ ), respectively. The direct effect of language switch on return intentions and word-of-mouth intentions dissipates after controlling for identity threat (both  $p$ -values  $> .05$ ), suggesting full mediation.

### *Discussion*

We replicate the language backfire effect using a study involving actual customer experiences. These findings support the notion that a frontline employee language switch can be an identity-threatening action that decreases satisfaction. Finally, this study also provides evidence for the wide array of negative outcomes that a language switch can bring, as respondents who had experienced a language switch were not only less satisfied but also less likely to come back and less likely to spread positive word-of-mouth. These negative outcomes demonstrate the importance of carefully managing a language switch. In Study 5, we build upon the notion of a language switch as an identity-threatening process, and demonstrate how a language switch complemented with a language proficiency compliment may offset the language backfire effect.

### **Study 5: Attenuating the language backfire effect**

#### *Procedure and sample*

We designed a three-group between-subjects experiment (no language switch, language switch without language proficiency compliment, language switch with language proficiency compliment) to test the fifth hypothesis. A visit to a Parisian shoe store serves as context for this study, hence we use a sample of customers who speak French as a second language. Data were collected using Prolific. Only respondents who speak French as a second language were allowed to participate. In order to test the effects both on customers who experience a switch to their first language, as in Studies 2-3, and customers who experience a switch to a lingua

franca, as in Study 1, we included both native English speakers and people who speak neither French nor English as their first language. In total, two-hundred thirty-one respondents completed the study. Thirty-three respondents were removed from the sample as they had French as their first language, leading to a final sample of 198 participants (57% female,  $M_{\text{Age}} = 32$ ). Of these, about 59% of the respondents were native English speakers, the remaining 41% of respondents had another language as first language.

Participants were asked to read a scenario, which manipulated the language switch by a frontline service employee. The scenario depicted a situation where the participant visits a friend in Paris. The scenario then specifies that when arriving in the city center, the participant still has two hours before meeting her/his friend and thus decides to enter a shoe store, after seeing a nice pair of shoes in the window. Browsing the store, the participant cannot find the pair of shoes immediately and asks the frontline employee for help. The participant initiates contact in French. Next, language switch as well as the use of a compliment were manipulated. In the no-switch condition, the frontline employee continued the conversation in French. In the language switch without language proficiency compliment condition, the frontline employee switched to English. In the language switch with language proficiency compliment, the frontline employee first complimented the customer on his or her French skills and indicated to the customer that he/she would continue in English in order to serve him/her better. In the remainder of the scenario, the frontline employee helps the customer in finding the desired shoes. The shoes fit the customer well, so he/she decides to buy them.

After reading the scenario, participants were asked to complete the same measures of satisfaction ( $\alpha = .80$ ), return intentions ( $\alpha = .81$ ), word-of-mouth intentions ( $\alpha = .91$ ), and identity threat ( $\alpha = .93$ ) as in the previous studies. We also measured customer fluency in both French and English using the same items as in Study 1. The respondents indicate feeling much more comfortable speaking English ( $M = 6.56$ ,  $SD = .92$ ) than French ( $M = 5.11$ ,  $SD =$

1.48,  $t(197) = 12.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ), they speak English more frequently ( $M = 6.48$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) than they speak French ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ,  $t(197) = 16.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and read more English texts ( $M = 6.55$ ,  $SD = .97$ ) than they read French texts ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ,  $t(197) = 21.03$ ,  $p < .001$ ). We also administered the same two-item scenario realism measure as in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .86$ ). Participants evaluated the scenario as realistic ( $M = 5.81$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ). The sample is thus suited for a study on whether customers feel less satisfied when served by a frontline employee in English when the conversation was started in French.

### *Results*

An analysis of variance (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics) revealed significant differences in satisfaction between the three experimental conditions ( $F(2, 195) = 14.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Customers served by a frontline employee who does not switch language are more satisfied ( $M = 5.81$ ) than customers served by a frontline employee who switches language ( $M = 5.22$ ; post-hoc test<sub>Bonferroni</sub>;  $p < .01$ ,  $r = -.24$ ), again supporting Hypotheses 1. Yet, when the language switch is accompanied by a language proficiency compliment, the language backfire effect is offset ( $M_{\text{No switch}} = 5.81$ ,  $M_{\text{Switch with compliment}} = 6.26$ , post-hoc test<sub>Bonferroni</sub>;  $p > .05$ ,  $r = .22$ ). This finding supports Hypothesis 5b. Similar patterns were observed for return intentions ( $M_{\text{No switch}} = 5.61$ ,  $M_{\text{Switch without compliment}} = 4.95$ ,  $M_{\text{Switch with compliment}} = 5.97$ ;  $F(2, 195) = 13.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and word-of-mouth intentions ( $M_{\text{No switch}} = 5.49$ ,  $M_{\text{Switch without compliment}} = 4.85$ ,  $M_{\text{Switch with compliment}} = 5.90$ ;  $F(2, 195) = 12.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

An additional analysis of variance shows that a language switch is perceived as an identity threat ( $M_{\text{No switch}} = 2.77$ ,  $M_{\text{Switch without compliment}} = 4.05$ , post-hoc test<sub>Bonferroni</sub>;  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .44$ ), yet this effect is attenuated when the language switch is accompanied with a language proficiency compliment ( $M_{\text{No switch}} = 2.77$ ,  $M_{\text{Switch with compliment}} = 2.89$ ; post-hoc test<sub>Bonferroni</sub>;  $p > .05$ ,  $r = .03$ ). These findings support Hypotheses 2 and 5a.

Next, a mediation analysis (Process, Model 4, 5000 bootstrap samples, Hayes, 2017) using dummy variables for both types of language switch (control group: no language switch) as independent variables, identity threat as the mediating variable, and satisfaction as the dependent variable revealed a significant indirect effect of language switch on satisfaction through identity threat for the language switch without compliment (Indirect:  $-.56$ , 95% CI =  $-.87$ ;  $-.34$ ), but not for the language switch with compliment (Indirect:  $-.05$ , 95% CI =  $-.25$ ;  $.16$ ). A language switch increases identity threat ( $\beta = 1.27$ ,  $t(195) = 5.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which then leads to a decrease in satisfaction ( $\beta = -.44$ ,  $t(194) = -8.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A language switch complemented by a compliment does not influence identity threat ( $\beta = .11$ ,  $t(195) = .49$ ,  $p > .05$ ). As the relationship between a language switch and satisfaction is no longer significant ( $\beta = -.03$ ,  $t(194) = -.16$ ,  $p > .05$ ), identity threat acts as a full mediator of this relationship. This finding again supports Hypothesis 3.

If no compliment is offered with the language switch, a frontline employee language switch also has a significant indirect effect on return intentions (Indirect:  $-.56$ , 95% CI =  $-.85$ ;  $-.33$ ) and word-of-mouth intentions (Indirect:  $-1.24$ , 95% CI =  $-2.23$ ;  $-.53$ ). The perceived identity threat caused by the language switch ( $\beta = 1.27$ ,  $t = 5.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ) decreases return intentions ( $\beta = -0.44$ ,  $t = 8.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and word-of-mouth intentions ( $\beta = -0.44$ ,  $t = 7.63$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The direct effect of language switch on return intentions and word-of-mouth intentions dissipates after controlling for identity threat (both  $p$ -values  $> .05$ ), suggesting full mediation. In case the language switch is accompanied by a compliment, we do not find a mediating effect of identity threat on the relationships between a language switch and return intentions (Indirect:  $-.05$ , 95% CI =  $-.25$ ;  $.16$ ) and word-of-mouth intentions (Indirect:  $-.05$ , 95% CI =  $-.26$ ;  $.15$ ).

Finally, given that we had both native English speakers and non-native English speakers in our dataset, we could contrast the language backfire effect for both groups. Adding the first

language (0=English as first language, 1= English not as first language) as a factor to our analyses of variance did not return significant main effects or interactions. In other words, the effect of a language switch on customer satisfaction and identity threat was similar when the frontline employee switched to the customer's first language and when the frontline employee switched to a lingua franca. These findings demonstrate the robustness of the language backfire effect.

### *Discussion*

The results of the final study again support the negative effect of a language switch on satisfaction, return intentions, and word-of-mouth intentions, and support the mediating role of identity threat. The final study again provides additional support for the language backfire effect in a retail context. This time, however, we can also identify a solution to the problem of the backfire effect: giving a small compliment on the customer's language skills offsets the negative effects of the language switch. The language backfire effect occurred both when switching to customers' first language and when switching to a English as a lingua franca.

### **General Discussion**

Consistent across five studies in different settings, using different methods and relying on a wide variety of samples, we consistently find a negative reaction to the language switch. To determine the magnitude of the language backfire effect, we calculated the effect sizes (i.e. correlations) for all four variables: satisfaction (Study 1: -.67, Study 2: -.23, Study 3: -.18, Study 4: -.41, Study 5: -.24), return intentions (Study 4: -.63, Study 5: -.25), word-of-mouth intentions (Study 4: -.49, Study 5: -.24) and identity threat (Study 2: .54, Study 3: .38, Study 4: .66, Study 5: .44). Integrating these effect sizes (Hunter and Schmidt 2004), we find an average sample-size weighted, reliability-corrected correlation coefficient of -.32 for

satisfaction, -.38 for return intentions, -.31 for word-of-mouth intentions, and .49 for identity threat. These results show that switching language can have medium to strong effects on this set of variables (Cohen 1988).

The language backfire effect thus represents a real challenge for retailers and service providers wanting to deliver superior experiences at the organizational frontline (Singh, et al. 2017). Frontline employees switching to the customers' first language - as intuitive and as recommended by prior literature as it might be (Callahan 2006; Holmqvist and Grönroos 2012) – may actually backfire if customers are motivated to pursue the interaction in their second language.

This paper contributes to the literature in three main ways. We first (i) identify and prove the existence of a language backfire running contrary to the extant literature, next (ii) explain the reasons underlying this negative effect and, (iii) show how this effect can be offset. Identifying and proving that the frontline employee's language switch leads to a decrease in satisfaction, return intentions, and word-of-mouth intentions represents a first contribution to the field as it stands in stark contrast to previous studies (Holmqvist 2011; Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist 2014). These findings illustrate that customers react favorably when being served in the language they *want* to speak, rather than being served in their first language. From a theoretical point of view, we argue that the motivations with which a person initiates a conversation in a certain language - and its theoretical underpinning in the self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2000; Ryan and Deci 2000) – form an important boundary condition to the speech accommodation theory.

Second, customers experiencing a language switch perceive this switch as an identity threat. Self-determination theory identifies this feeling as a basic psychological need for competence (Harter 1978), and the language switch threatens this self-perception. Connected to identity threat, we further find an impact of linguistic acculturation for immigrant

customers. In line with studies on acculturation indicating that many acculturated immigrants do not want to be identified by their language (Berry and Krishnan 1992; Koslow et al. 1994), we find that highly acculturated immigrants react more negatively to a language switch. These results are easy to understand in the light of identity threat, as more acculturated immigrants feel more acculturated to the majority culture, explaining their negative reaction to a language switch.

From a methodological perspective, our studies provide quantitative support for the relationship between language and identity. This effort was deemed necessary as the majority of studies on language and identity are qualitative in nature (Heller, 2003; Jenks, 2013). Taking a broader perspective, our research reinforces the call for better understanding identity-based consumer behavior (Reed, et al., 2012). While consumer research on gender identity (e.g. Puntoni, Sweldens, and Tavassoli, 2011) or ethnic identity (e.g. Hirschman, 1981) is quite common, this research shows the value of further exploring the role of linguistic identity in customer behavior.

Third, our final contribution consists of identifying a possible solution for the language backfire effect. Having drawn on self-determination theory to identify the role of an identity threat, we studied whether the effect of a compliment counters the negative effects of identity threat. Our results show that a language proficiency compliment is enough to completely offset the identity threat as well as the negative direct effects on satisfaction, word-of-mouth and return intentions. These findings also complement existing research, which mainly examines the effects of giving customers compliments on sales (Dunyon, et al. 2010) or compliance with a suggestion (Jacob and Guéguen 2014). This research shows that a compliment not only fosters positive reactions but may also attenuate negative customer reactions like the language backfire effect.

### *Managerial Implications*

This study offers several insights for frontline retail managers regarding how employees' language use influences interactions with customers. Our results identify a problem with current practices and also proposes a solution, leading to new key managerial implications. First, the practice of switching language to accommodate customers is commonplace, and no doubt done with the best intentions (Callahan 2006). Our initial intuition study shows that people believe this practice to be beneficial. A former French minister even called on French frontline employees to address foreigners in France in English. Our results suggest that the minister was at least partly mistaken. Parisian service employees following the minister's advice would end up making customers less satisfied instead of the minister's intention of pleasing them. The combined findings of our paper strongly suggest that this managerial approach risks being mistaken. Rather than feeling pleased, many customers end up feeling dissatisfied, less likely to spread positive word-of-mouth and, crucially, less likely to return. Our findings thus challenge current frontline managerial practices. We believe it to be important to remedy this situation. As Ashley and Noble (2014) showed, even small routines such as how closing times are managed may lead to backfire effects, as in the case of Oprah Winfrey's boycott of Hermès due to being denied entry close to closing time. We believe the language use of the retail frontline employees is a similar case that might lead to negative consequences.

For retail managers, we offer two specific recommendations. Predicting how customers relate to frontline personnel is complicated (Holmqvist, Guest and Grönroos 2015), but our findings lead us to propose that a fairly safe strategy would be to follow the customer's lead. If the customer initiates the interaction in a particular language, frontline personnel should adapt. In some cases, this strategy might be challenging for frontline employees as customers might not be that fluent in their second language, and the customer could have problems



completing the interaction in that language. Our results strongly suggest frontline employees should still not take the lead in switching. Second, if they decide to do so, they should first offer a small compliment on the customer's language skills. This compliment completely offsets the negative reaction, costs nothing and only takes a few seconds. If a strongly negative customer reaction can be offset so easily, then frontline retail managers would be well advised to consider it. In summary, we thus recommend managers in charge of stores receiving international customers and/or domestic customers in bilingual areas to reconsider the current strategy of recommending frontline employees to switch language.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

There are certain limitations in the current manuscript that call for future research. A key limitation is that all our studies take place in contexts in which communication tends to be rather simple. Whether in a retail context such as buying shoes or a hospitality context such as ordering from a waiter, relatively little communication is involved, and the level of language needed is rather basic. These contexts probably represent the most common contexts of customer's trying out their second language skills. Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh (2013) showed that customers' preference for using their strongest language is most pronounced in complex and important contexts such as visiting a doctor or signing a bank loan. Future research might examine situations in which the outcome is crucial and the vocabulary often rather complicated. In addition, researchers identified several reasons for why customers might use their second language, such as blending in, practicing the language, or showing off, among others. Future research might explore whether customer reactions to a language switch differ depending on the particular motivation for speaking their second language.

Finally, this paper examines interactions between customers and frontline employees. In recent years, however, we are witnessing a surge of technology infusion in organizational

frontlines (De Keyser et al. 2019). Organizations nowadays are already experimenting with translation apps that can facilitate the interaction between customers and service employees (De Wilde, Praet, and Van Vaerenbergh 2019), and in the future artificial intelligence-based translation technologies and digital conversational agents will become available. Future research may examine whether customers still prefer to start an interaction in their second language when communicating with robots. Conversely, these technologies will have to decide in what language to address customers. Future research on the role of technology is necessary, as the findings might be used to help programming these technologies.

## References

- Aquino, Karl and Scott Douglas (2003), "Identity Threat and Antisocial Behavior in Organizations: The Moderating Effects of Individual Differences, Aggressive Modeling, and Hierarchical Status," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 90(1), 195–208.
- Ashley, Christy and Stephanie M. Nobel (2014), "It's Closing Time: Territorial Behaviors from Customers in Response to Front Line Employees," *Journal of Retailing*, 90(1) 74–92.
- Baker, Will (2009), "Language, Culture and Identity through English as a Lingua Franca in Asia: Notes from the Field," *The Linguistics Journal*, 4(September), 8–35.
- Balaji, Makam S., Sanjit Kumar Roy, and Walfried M. Lassar (2017), "Language Divergence in Service Encounters: Revisiting its Influence on Word-of-Mouth," *Journal of Business Research*, 72 (March), 210-213.
- Baumeister, Roy F. and Mark R. Leary (1995), "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation", *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497–529.
- Becker, Thomas E., Guclu Atinc, James A. Breugh, Kevin D. Carlson, Jeffrey R. Edwards, and Paul E. Spector, (2016), "Statistical Control in Correlational Studies: 10 Essential Recommendations for Organizational Researchers," *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 36(2), 157-167.
- Brumbaugh, Anne M. and José Antonio Rosa (2009), "Perceived Discrimination, Cashier Metaperceptions, Embarrassment, and Confidence as Influencers of Coupon Use: An Ethnoracial–Socioeconomic Analysis," *Journal of Retailing*, 85(3) 347-362.
- Callahan, Laura (2006), "English or Spanish? Language Accommodation in New York City Service Encounters," *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 3, 29–54.

- Claus, Bart, Kelly Geyskens, Kobe Millet, and Siegfried Dewitte (2012), “The Referral Backfire Effect: The Identity-Threatening Nature of Referral Failure,” *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 29(4), 370–79.
- Clément, Richard, Susan C. Baker and Peter D. MacIntyre (2003), “Willingness to Communicate in a Second Language: The Effects of Context, Norms, and Vitality,” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 22(2) 190–209.
- Cohen, Jacob (1988). *Statistical Power Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences*. Second edition, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates.
- Crystal, David (2003), *English as a Global Language*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Deci, Edward L. (1975), *Intrinsic Motivation*, New York: Plenum.
- Deci, Edward L. and Richard M. Ryan (2000), “The “What” and “Why” of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior,” *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268.
- De Keyser, Arne, Sarah Köcher, Linda Alkire, Cédric Verbeeck, and Jay Kandampully (2019), “Frontline Service Technology Infusion: Conceptual Archetypes and Future Research Directions,” *Journal of Service Management*, 30(1) 156-183.
- De Wilde, July, Ellen Van Praet, and Yves Van Vaerenbergh (2019), “Language Discordance and Technological Facilitation in Health Care Service Encounters: A Contrastive Experiment,” in: Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Pilar, Lucía Fernández-Amaya and María de la O Hernández-López (Eds.), *Technology Mediated Service Encounters*, Amsterdam, the Netherlands: John Benjamins.
- Dunyon, Josh, Valerie Gossling, Sarah Willden, and John S. Seiter (2010), “Compliments and Purchasing Behavior in Telephone Sales Interactions,” *Psychological Reports*, 106(1), 27-30.

- Faul, Franz, Edgar Erdfelder, Albert-Georg Lang, and Axel Buchner, A. (2007), "G\*Power 3: A Flexible Statistical Power Analysis for the Social, Behavioral, and Biomedical Sciences," *Behavior Research Methods*, 39(2), 175-191.
- Gao, Leilei, S. Christian Wheeler, and Baba Shiv (2009), "The 'Shaken Self': Product Choices as a Means of Restoring Self-View Confidence," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36(1) 29–38.
- Genesee, Fred and Richard Y. Bourhis (1988), "Evaluative Reactions to Language Choice Strategies: The Role of Sociostructural Factors," *Language & Communication*, 8(3/4) 229–50.
- Giles, Howard, Donald M. Taylor and Richard Y. Bourhis (1973), "Toward a Theory of Interpersonal Accommodation through Speech Accommodation: Some Canadian Data," *Language in Society*, 2(2), 177–92.
- Golato, Andrea (2005). *Compliments and Compliment Responses: Grammatical Structure and Sequence Organization*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Grewal, Dhruv, Anne L. Roggeveen and Jens Nordfält (2017), "The Future of Retailing," *Journal of Retailing*, 93(1), 1-6.
- Hagger, Martin S., Severine Koch, and Nikos L.D. Chatzisarantis (2015), "The Effect of Causality Orientations and Positive Competence-Enhancing Feedback on Intrinsic Motivation: A Test of Additive And Interactive Effects," *Personality and Individual Differences*, 72(1), 107-111.
- Harter, Susan (1978), "Effectance Motivation Reconsidered: Toward a Developmental Model," *Human Development*, 1, 661–669.
- Hayes, Andrew F. (2017). *Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis: A Regression-Based Approach*. Second edition, Guilford Press: New York, NY.

- Hayes, Andrew F. and Jorg Matthes (2009), "Computational Procedures for Probing Interactions in OLS and Logistic Regression: SPSS and SAS Implementations," *Behavioral Research Methods*, 41(August), 924–36.
- Heller, Monica (2003), "Globalization, the new economy, and the Commodification of Language and Identity," *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 7(4), 473-492.
- Hirschman, Elizabeth C. (1981), "American Jewish Ethnicity: Its Relationship to Some Selected Aspects of Consumer Behavior," *Journal of Marketing*, 45 (Summer), 102-110.
- Holmqvist, Jonas (2011), "Consumer Language Preferences in Service Encounters: A Cross-Cultural Perspective," *Managing Service Quality*, 21(2), 178–91.
- Holmqvist, Jonas and Christian Grönroos (2012), "How Does Language Matter for Services? Challenges and Propositions for Service Research," *Journal of Service Research*, 15(4), 430–42.
- Holmqvist, Jonas, Duncan Guest and Christian Grönroos (2015), "The role of psychological distance in value creation," *Management Decision*, 53(7), 1430-1451.
- Holmqvist, Jonas and Yves Van Vaerenbergh (2013), "Perceived Importance of Native Language Use: High- and Low-Involvement Service Encounters," *Service Industries Journal*, 33 (15/16), 1659–1671.
- Holmqvist, Jonas, Yves Van Vaerenbergh and Christian Grönroos (2017), "Language Use in Services: Recent Advances and Directions for Future Research," *Journal of Business Research*, 72 (March), 114–118.
- Hunter, John E., and Frank L. Schmidt (2004). *Methods of Meta-Analysis: Correcting Error and Bias in Research Findings*. Second edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Jacob, Céline and Nicolas Guéguen (2014), "The Effect of Compliments on Customers' Compliance with a Food Server's Suggestion," *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 40 (July), 59-61.

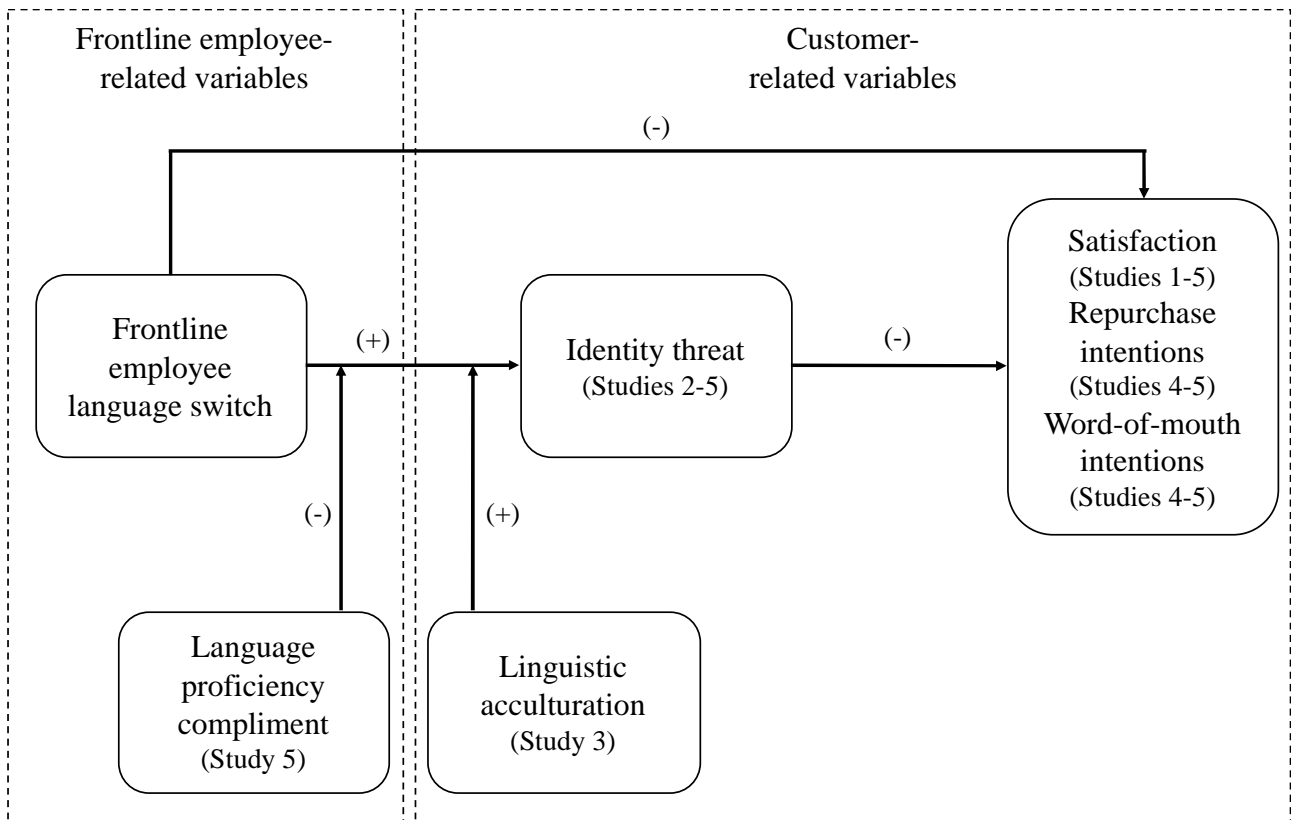
- Jenks, Christopher (2013), "Your Pronunciation and Your Accent is Very Excellent: Orientations of Identity during Compliment Sequences in English as a Lingua Franca Encounters," *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 13(2), 165-181.
- Koslow, Scott, Prem N. Shamdasani, and Ellen E. Touchstone (1994), "Exploring Language Effects in Ethnic Advertising: A Sociolinguistic Perspective," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20(4), 575–85.
- Kotabe, Masaaki and Tanvi Kothari (2016), "Emerging Market Multinational Companies' Evolutionary Paths to Building a Competitive Advantage from Emerging Markets to Developed Countries," *Journal of World Business*, 51(5), 729-743.
- Kraak, Johannes M. and Jonas Holmqvist (2017), "The Authentic Service Employee: Service Employees' Language Use for Authentic Service Experiences," *Journal of Business Research*, 72 (March), 199–209.
- Krishna, Aradhna and Rohini Ahluwalia (2008), "Language Choice in Advertising to Bilinguals: Asymmetric Effects for Multinationals versus Local Firms," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 35(4) 692–705.
- Krishnan, Ahalya and J.W. Berry (1992), "Acculturative Stress and Acculturation Attitudes among Indian Immigrants to the United States," *Psychology and Developing Societies*, 4(2) 187–212.
- Laroche, Michel, Chankon Kim, Michael Hui, and Annamma Joy (1993), "Acculturation of Italians Toward the French and English Cultures and Its Effect on Lifestyles," in *European Advances in Consumer Research*, Volume 1, eds. W. Fred Van Raaij and Gary J. Bamossy, Provo, UT : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 269-277.
- Leary, Mark R. and Roy F. Baumeister (2000), "The Nature and Functions of Self-Esteem: Sociometer Theory", in: Zanna MP (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 32. San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1–62.

- Liao, Hui (2007), "Do it Right This Time: The Role of Employee Service Recovery Performance in Customer-Perceived Justice and Customer Loyalty After Service Failures," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(2), 475-489.
- Lim, Tae-Seop and John W. Bowers (1991), "Facework: Solidarity, Approbation, and Tact," *Human Communication Research*, 17(3) 415–50.
- Luna, David and Laura A. Peracchio (2005), "Advertising to Bilingual Consumers: The Impact of Code-Switching on Persuasion," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(4), 760–65.
- Luyckx, Koen, Maarten Vansteenkiste, Luc Goossens and Bart Duriez (2009), "Basic Need Satisfaction and Identity Formation: Bridging Self-Determination Theory and Process-Oriented Identity Research," *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 56(2), 276–288.
- Marin, Gerardo, Fabio Sabogal, Barbara VanOss Marin, Regina Otero-Sabogal and Eliseo J. Perez-Stable (1987), "Development of a Short Acculturation Scale for Hispanics," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 9(2), 183–205.
- Maxham, James G. III and Richard G. Netemeyer (2002), "A Longitudinal Study of Complaining Customers' Evaluations of Multiple Service Failures and Recovery Efforts," *Journal of Marketing*, 66(4) 57–71.
- Muzaini, Hamzah (2006), "Backpacking Southeast Asia: Strategies of 'Looking Local'," *Annals of Tourism Research*, 33(1), 144–61.
- Otterbring, Tobias, Christine Ringler, Nancy J. Sirianni, and Anders Gustafsson (2018), "The Abercrombie & Fitch Effect: The Impact of Physical Dominance on Male Customers' Status-Signaling Consumption," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 55(1) 69-79.
- Peñaloza, Lisa (1994), "Atraversando Fronteras / Border Crossing: A Critical Ethnographic Exploration of the Consumer Acculturation of Mexican Immigrants," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(1) 32-54.

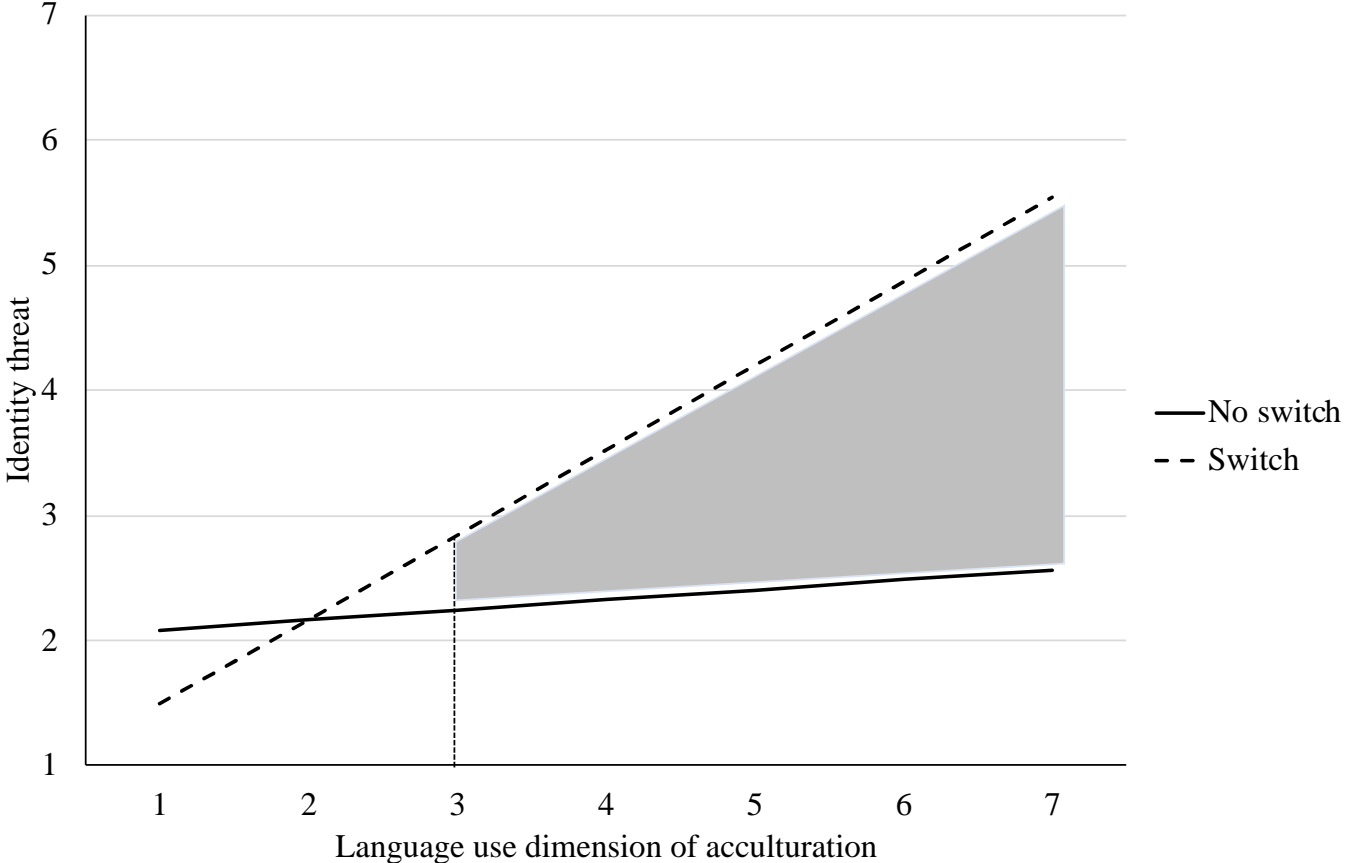


- Puntoni, Stefano, Steven Sweldens, and Nader T. Tavassoli (2011), "Gender Identity Salience and Perceived Vulnerability to Breast Cancer," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 48(3), 413-424.
- Reed, Americus II, Mark R. Forehand, Stefano Puntoni, and Luk Warlop (2012), "Identity-Based Consumer Behavior," *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 29(4), 310-321.
- Ryan, Richard M. and Edward L. Deci (2000), "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being," *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78.
- Singh, Jagdip, Michael Brady, Todd Arnold, and Tom Brown (2017), "The Emergent Field of Organizational Frontlines," *Journal of Service Research*, 20(1), 3-11.
- Surprenant, Carol F. and Michael R. Solomon (1987), "Predictability and Personalization in the Service Encounter", *Journal of Marketing*, 51(2), 73–80.
- Van Vaerenbergh, Yves and Jonas Holmqvist (2013), "Speak my Language if you Want my Money: Service Language's Influence on Consumer Tipping Behavior," *European Journal of Marketing*, 47(8), 1276–1292.
- Van Vaerenbergh, Yves and Jonas Holmqvist (2014), "Examining the Relationship Between Language Divergence and Word-of-Mouth Intentions," *Journal of Business Research*, 67(8), 1601–1608.
- Van Vaerenbergh, Yves, Vermeir, Iris, and Larivière, Bart (2013), "Service Recovery's Impact on Customers Next-in-Line," *Managing Service Quality*, 23(6), 495-512.
- Zeithaml, Valarie A., Leonard L. Berry and A. Parasuraman (1996), "The Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality," *Journal of Marketing*, 60(2), 31–46.

**Figure 1: Conceptual model**



**Figure 2:** Identity threat as a function of frontline employee language switch and linguistic acculturation (Study 3)



**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics

Variable	Study 1		Study 2		Study 3		Study 4		Study 5		
	FELS conditions		FELS conditions		FELS conditions		FELS conditions		FELS conditions		
	No Switch (n=42)	Switch (n=47)	No Switch (n=60)	Switch (n=60)	No Switch (n=65)	Switch (n=136)	No Switch (n=22)	Switch (n=21)	No Switch (n=66)	Switch (n=64)	Switch with compliment (n=68)
Identity threat	-	-	2.22 (.94)	3.91*** (1.60)	2.31 (1.42)	3.66*** (1.60)	2.64 (.97)	4.34*** (1.02)	2.77 (1.26)	4.05 (1.34)	2.89*** (1.42)
Satisfaction	5.62 (.61)	3.77*** (1.30)	5.60 (1.08)	5.08* (1.12)	5.48 (1.05)	5.03** (1.15)	5.71 (1.24)	4.39** (1.73)	5.81 (1.13)	5.22 (1.33)	6.26*** (0.91)
Repurchase intentions	-	-	-	-	-	-	5.89 (.83)	3.89*** (1.56)	5.61 (1.14)	4.95 (1.40)	5.97*** (0.88)
Word-of-mouth intentions	-	-	-	-	-	-	5.45 (1.12)	3.87*** (1.72)	5.49 (1.20)	4.85 (1.40)	5.90*** (1.06)

Note: FELS: Frontline Employee Language Switch. \*:  $p < .05$ ; \*\*:  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*:  $p < .001$  For each variable, means appear first, followed by standard deviations in brackets.

**Table 2:** Direct and indirect effects (Studies 2-5)

<i>Direct effects</i>	Study 2			Study 3			Study 4			Study 5		
	Parameter estimate	S.E.	<i>p</i> -value	Parameter estimate	S.E.	<i>p</i> -value	Parameter estimate	S.E.	<i>p</i> -value	Parameter estimate	S.E.	<i>p</i> -value
Switch → Identity threat	1.68	.24	< .001	1.35	.23	< .001	1.70	.30	< .001	1.27	.24	< .001
Switch with compliment → Identity threat	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.11	.23	n.s.
Switch → Satisfaction	.13	.21	n.s.	-.03	.17	n.s.	.48	.44	n.s.	-.03	.18	n.s.
Switch with compliment → Satisfaction	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.50	.17	< .01
Identity threat → Satisfaction	-.38	.07	< .001	-.31	.05	< .001	-1.06	.17	< .001	-.44	.05	< .001
<i>Indirect effects</i>	Parameter estimate	S.E.	95% CI	Parameter estimate	S.E.	95% CI	Parameter estimate	S.E.	95% CI	Parameter estimate	S.E.	95% CI
Switch → Identity threat → Satisfaction	-.64	.16	[-1.00; -.38]	-.42	.10	[-.63; -.25]	-1.80	.50	[-2.93; -.97]	-.56	.13	[-.87; -.34]
Switch with compliment → Identity threat → Satisfaction	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.05	.10	[-.25; .16]

Note : CI = Confidence Interval

Graphical abstract

# One day in Paris...

