Language Research in Marketing

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Foundations and Trends® in Marketing

Foundations and Trends® in Marketing
Volume 16, Issue 3, 2022
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Contents

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ABSTRACT

This monograph aims to introduce researchers to the fascinating world of linguistics and to show how to conduct meaningful language research in marketing, exploring the way language influences behavior and how language can express thoughts, emotions, and mental states in marketing contexts. Ann Kronrod, who holds a Ph.D. in linguistics and conducts linguistic research in marketing, familiarizes the reader with fundamental concepts and prominent theories in linguistics, reviews the currently available research in marketing that examines language questions, lays out a guide to conducting compelling language research in marketing, and offers exciting future directions for developing new perspectives on language within marketing research. This monograph can be used as a basic guide for beginning researchers who are interested to conduct language research in marketing, or as a summary for more seasoned researchers who already acquired linguistics education and would like to get up to date on recent streams in the research of language in marketing.

Introduction

Can a product review influence a consumer's decision to purchase or not to purchase a product? Yes, it can. Can a single sentence in the review influence this decision? Yes, it can. Can one word change your mind? Yes, it can. Can a single sound or letter make a difference? Yes. It. Can.

My goal is to show you how language influences behavior in marketing, and how language can express thoughts, emotions, and mental states. I will review and summarize research on language in marketing and accompany my review with illustrations and examples. Research of language in marketing is developing, and has lately become a permanent topic in marketing research and teaching. Having earned my Ph.D. in psycho-linguistics, I am excited to share my extensive knowledge of linguistics and show you how it can be used in research of language in marketing.

This monograph consists of four parts:

Part I will cover the basics of linguistics in simple terms and introduce readers to the most prominent linguistic theories, building a knowledge foundation that can help practitioners, researchers and students develop new ideas in marketing.

Part II will provide a comprehensive review of current research of language in marketing, identifying theoretical contributions, methodological approaches, and practical implications.

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Part III will overview the most common methods in linguistic inquiry and lay out a step-by-step pathway to developing language research in marketing, starting from a marketing problem, raising new research questions, evolving into a new theory that can identify behavior and explain it, and materializing into a methodological approach that yields meaningful conclusions.

Part IV will summarize the monograph and outline suggestions for future research of language in marketing.

It is my hope that readers will enjoy new discoveries while reading this monograph and that the text will spur novel linguistic research contributions in the field of marketing.

Part IV

Summary and a Look Into the Future

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Summary

11.1 What Does It Take to Do Language Research in Marketing? Theory, Literature, Predictions, Methods

Theory and literature. Linguistic theories are wonderful idea generators, because they focus on deep processes underlying behavior. To do language research in marketing, the researcher would strive to be well-versed in linguistic theory. This would include understanding the fundaments of language, starting from phonetics, through morphology, semantics, grammar, syntax, pragmatics, and cross-cultural linguistics. Some researchers choose to focus on one element from this list, but since each element serves as the foundation for the following element, learning only one part of linguistics may put the researcher at a disadvantage. It is therefore recommended that a researcher interested in language research in marketing familiarizes herself with all elements of linguistics theory. My goal in Part 1 of this monograph was to help readers get familiarized with the most well-known approaches and theories in

linguistics.[1] In Part II, I aimed to summarize the current literature that investigated language within the marketing field.

Fuller knowledge of linguistics is also useful for posing a research question and for merging multi-disciplinary literature into a sensible theory. In addition, as the main focus of the research relates to marketing questions, the researcher should be proficient in marketing theory and literature.

Predictions. Posing the right research question, which starts from a practical marketing issue and aims to suggest a resolution of that issue via linguistic inquiry, will help the researcher to move beyond descriptive research to predictive research. By this, the researcher will also contribute to linguistics in the process. Through this process, the researcher will generate new ideas that can improve existing marketing findings and theories, measurement and manipulation, or generate brand new linguistic ideas about marketing phenomena. Thus, researchers of language in marketing are especially well positioned to use the marketing context in order to convey and interpret language – one of the main differentiating aspects of human behavior.

Methods. In Part III of this monograph I described a variety of methods that are used in linguistic research. Some of them are familiar to the reader from other fields of research, some are new to the reader. Being knowledgeable about various methods opens the researcher up not only to new linguistics methods, but also widens the researcher's horizons for research questions and theory. Similarly to the way being familiar with various paths in the forest allows the traveler to arrive at different spots, knowing various ways to test theory enables the researcher to arrive at more diverse research theory and predictions.

Taken together, proficiency in both marketing and linguistic theories, literature and methods will make up a well-rounded researcher of language in marketing.

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[1]Researchers wishing to develop a strong linguistics foundation may undertake reading articles in linguistics and some basic handbooks, such as the *Handbook of Pragmatics* (Horn and Ward, 2006) or the *Handbook of Psycholinguistics* (Fernández and Smith Cairns, 2017).

11.2 Common Pitfalls to Notice

Not all that glitters is gold. Perhaps not all research that deals with words should be called language research. For example, research on gain and loss framing in health (e.g., Covey, 2014; Zhao and Pechmann, 2007) examines whether communication promoting healthful behaviors is more effective when it mentions gain motivations (e.g., You will live longer if you quit smoking) or loss motivations (e.g., You will die sooner if you keep smoking). While clearly the difference between the two messages is defined by language, the research question here is not linguistic, because it does not deal with any of the areas of language inquiry: phonetics, morphology, semantics, pragmatics or sociolinguistics. In other words, the question is not whether the phonetic/morphological structure of the two messages influences consumers, nor whether the meanings of the two messages are responsible for consumer reactions to them. Instead, the research question here is purely communicational – whether mentioning gains or losses is more effective in modifying behaviors.

A researcher interested in conducting language research in marketing should carefully consider the actual question they would like to pose and explore. If the question is not about a linguistic aspect of text or behavior, perhaps a different angle is more appropriate to investigate it.

Asking the right question – and testing the right question. Related to my previous point, I'd like to suggest another consideration: at times, a researcher may ask the right question – for example, whether personal pronouns convey a different meaning than other pronouns – but when it comes to testing the question, the researcher defaults to what might be closer to their research methodology comfort zone, and ends up testing a different research question. For example, the researcher would focus too much on the outcomes of using certain, over other, personal pronouns. This sort of research would be characterized as consumer behavior research, but hardly a linguistic one. The linguistic question here is how consumers construct meaning based on personal pronoun use. For instance, I mentioned before the different agency meaning of "It broke" versus "I broke it". The use of first person pronoun in this example signals intentionality, taking personal responsibility, and power.

Importantly, the linguistic question here is how exactly pronoun choice influences implied meaning. To answer this question, the researcher would integrate literature and explore the way sentence structure can alter meaning, and the way the word "it" changes agency depending on its grammatical position in the sentence.

Relevance and the "so what" question. As mentioned before, while linguistics is mainly a descriptive area of research, marketing is predominantly predictive, and academics usually conduct research bearing practical implications in mind. With that said, when a researcher sets to inquire into a question regarding language in marketing, one possible pitfall to avoid is remaining within a linguistic mindset and devoting insufficient attention to the marketing aspect of the question. One immediate outcome of this is reduced interest towards the research from the marketing research community. To address this challenge, the researcher would consider starting off with identifying a marketing problem (rather than a linguistic problem) and then developing an explanation and solution based on linguistic theory. In Part III, Section 2a, I brought examples of research questions stemming from a marketing problem, or an application of linguistic issues in marketing. While both approaches are useful for research of language in marketing and can yield substantial contribution to marketing theory and practice, starting from a marketing problem can prove an easier way to help a less experienced researcher to remain relevant to marketing.

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Where Do We Go from Here? Evolving Directions of Language Research in Marketing

12.1 Text Mining and Text Analysis

Developments in the technology and tools for big data analytics have germinated marketing research focusing on text mining and text analysis. The recent years have seen an exponential growth in publications that employ text analysis tools to inquire into marketing phenomena (for a summary see Humphreys and Wang, 2018). Indeed, text analysis can provide insights about the authors of text – be it consumers or firms – and about its potential influence on recipients. Text analysis can also help researchers understand marketing processes and generate predictions (Berger *et al.*, 2020). Within the realm of text analysis there are largely two approaches adopted by researchers in marketing: one involves developing lists of topic-related words, like certainty words, and the other involves machine learning – a data-driven approach that helps researchers detect commonalities and derive conclusions based on these commonalities. Hartmann *et al.* (2019) compare the performance and usability of ten text analysis approaches that involve text/word lists or machine learning and about 40 datasets in various languages. The authors provide conclusions regarding the approaches that provide more successful and accurate output to understand marketing behavior.

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In particular, the authors suggest that some word-list based approaches are always inferior to machine learning.[1]

Today, text analysis often involves both list-based word searches and machine learning approaches. One of the first works, by Netzer *et al.* (2012), demonstrated the power of automatic text analysis tools to detect relevant, practically useful textual elements that tell a story about consumer experience with the product. In the same year, Tirunillai and Tellis (2012) found intriguing relationships between the language in user-generated content and stock price. They found that negative emotional content has a significant and long-lasting negative effect on abnormal returns, while positive emotional content does not influence stock abnormal returns. Echoing these findings, Ludwig *et al.* (2013) found that larger increases in positive emotional language in product reviews do not have a vast effect on increases in sales. However, when negative emotional language increases, it influences sales (negatively) to a great extent. Another finding in the same work is that a match in linguistic style between a review and common style used within the community where it was posted can make the review more influential, ultimately driving more sales.

Since then, the field of marketing research has seen developments in both the tools or software for text analysis, and the way researchers integrate those tools for innovative conclusion making. For example, Lee *et al.* (2018) conducted content analysis of ads on Facebook and found that including certain aspects like price, emotional content and brand personality elements in the ad can influence user engagement with the ad (likes, clicks, shares etc.). Preoţiuc-Pietro *et al.* (2015) find that people with higher income use more complex language, which indicates higher perceived education and intelligence, as well as more extensive expression of fear and anger. While these two works are not strictly linguistic, as they do not analyze a linguistic phenomenon, they can serve as fruitful ground for the development of linguistic research using text mining. Berman *et al.* (2019) analyzed a dataset with millions of tweets about political debates posted towards the 2016 U.S. presidential elections

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[1]Note however that some research identifies mistakes in machine learning approaches that might influence results of research conducted in marketing (e.g., Watts and Adriano, 2021).

and found that emotional language in tweets posted during the debate drove less shares and other reactions, but the effect of emotionality increased when the debate was over. These findings can be generalized to other contexts that involve before-and-after user-generated content, and future research can explore how the language of such content changes depending on the immediacy of the experience/event. Rocklage *et al.* (2018a,b) used human judges to evaluate the degree of emotionality of various adjectives, such as "awesome" or "excellent" to build and test an online tool (The Evaluative Lexicon) that can detect the intensity of emotion in text, by the words it uses. The researchers Büschken and Allenby (2020) use conjunctions like "and", "or", "but" in order to detect changes of topics discussed in product reviews. The ability of automatic approaches to categorize large datasets into sub-topics is useful for marketers, but consumers who read product reviews naturally use grammatical elements such as conjunctions to learn about offerings, as one would do in a conversation. Therefore, the analysis of conjunctions can be insightful to understand consumers.

Text analysis can be applied not only to consumer-generated content but also so Marketer-generated communication. for example, Colladon (2018) developed The Semantic Brand Score (SBS) – a new tool to measure brand importance by using textual data. A work involving text analysis of communication on Facebook and Twitter coming from *brands* (Pezzuti *et al.*, 2021), shows that certainty-related words, such as always or everything, make the brands seem more powerful and consequently drive higher consumer engagement in terms of likes, comments, or shares and retweets.

As a developing field, the field of text analysis within marketing has yielded several attempts to share, instruct, guide and educate researchers on text analysis tools and approaches (e.g., Berger *et al.*, 2020; Hartmann *et al.*, 2019). For example, Zaki and Mccoll-Kennedy (2020) proposed a step-by-step text mining analysis process applied to service marketing. The authors suggest ways to choose between analysis tools and illustrate possible insights that can be driven from these techniques. In addition, over the years there have been numerous workshops, courses and conference forums conducted with the purpose of enriching the research community. Future developments in these

areas can involve database sharing and code sharing – practices that are common in the computer science community.

12.2   Computational Linguistics

Sophistication of the field of Natural Language Programming, Machine Learning, and Computational Linguistics has opened the opportunity for researchers to engage in more complex computational tasks than text analysis. Computational linguistics extends the capabilities of text analysis by adding a way to measure and analyze linguistic phenomena such as language concreteness, figurative language, language diversity and so on. This field is new to marketing research, and therefore only a handful of articles that involve computational linguistics have already been published. One interesting work deals with the definition and computation of narrative structure. Van Laer *et al.* (2019) developed a computational method to calculate the narrativity and its capability to evoke narrative-transportation in consumer-generated product reviews. For example, the approach involves mathematical computation of certain grammatical aspects of the text, together with certain word classes. Another work, interested in deception detection in product reviews (Kronrod *et al.*, 2017), involves computation of language concreteness, using a combinatorial formula common in other fields such as physics and mathematics. Moon *et al.* (2020) also involved computational methods to detect and characterize the language of fake reviews. These are three examples involving computational linguistics for a more accurate automated measurement of language behavior and effects in marketing. In the future, researchers in marketing may develop their own computational methods to measure linguistic aspects in marketing and derive conclusions about marketing phenomena.

12.3   AI in Service

Advancements in technology humanization have evoked growing interest from marketing practitioners and researchers (e.g., Davenport *et al.*, 2020; Huang and Rust, 2021). Research in marketing has been focused on consumer acceptance of AI conversation agents and service technology

(Carmon *et al.*, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2019). One particular focus of interest involves external appearance of service machines (e.g., Mende *et al.*, 2019). For example, Rese *et al.* (2020) measure the acceptance of the text-based "Emma" chatbot who is able to provide natural language response to consumer shopping-related questions. The authors surveyed millennial participants and found that acceptance of the chatbot is governed by considerations such as conversation authenticity, usefulness and enjoyment, as well as privacy.

Very recent works have begun to turn our attention to AI communication and interaction abilities. With the development of natural language processing and simulation, conversational AI today are exploring new possibilities, such as addressing meaningful emotional needs of customers (Carvalho and Scornavacca, 2020; Puntoni *et al.*, 2021). However, research directly exploring the language used by AI systems and consumers who interact with them, are currently only under development. For example, Bakpayev and Kronrod (2020) rely on the ability of figurative language to signal social presence (Delfino and Manca, 2007) and investigate the use of figurative language such as idioms, metaphor or humor, and its effects on the success of customer-AI agent service interactions. When accomplished, these developments will open the door for linguistic analysis of consumer interactions with AI systems, and in this way put a finger on the most pulsing artery of current industry challenges for humanization of AI conversation.

12.4 Developmental Linguistics

A subfield of linguistics that has not been mentioned in this monograph yet is developmental linguistics – the investigation of the way children acquire language and develop linguistic knowledge and usage skills. Developmental linguistics is different from research of bilingualism, which focuses on the way one's first and second language correspond with each other while the individual is processing and responding to linguistic stimuli around. Developmental linguistics is centered around early childhood processes, which occur during the first 5–7 years and are time sensitive. For example, research on language mistakes that young children make supports the notion that children are prone to inductive

learning – a child's tendency to infer a rule from a single occurrence (Demetriou *et al.*, 2021).

Researchers interested in exploring developmental linguistics in marketing would integrate literature on marketing and children (e.g., Echelbarger *et al.*, 2019; Maimaran *et al.*, 2019 or Maimaran and Echelbarger, 2020), together with linguistics literature and marketing literature. Such endeavors promise to be rich in opportunities for exploration and conclusion. Notably, researchers do not necessarily need to involve children as research participants in order to derive conclusions about developmental processes. For example, Pathak *et al.* (2017b) find that luxury products work better with brand names consisting of phonemes that are typically acquired at a later age (e.g., g, k, f), rather than earlier age (b, d, m), because phonemes that are acquired at a later age are more likely to occur in less frequent words in the language and therefore brand names constructed of these phonemes are perceived as more rare.

Monograph Conclusion

My goal in writing this monograph was to introduce researchers to the fundamentals of language research in marketing. I started off with explaining the basic concepts and subfields of linguistic inquiry, and describing the most prominent theories in linguistics (Part I). Then I provided an extensive review of literature in marketing that explored language in this way or another (Part II). After that, I laid out a proposed pathway to conduct research of language in marketing and suggested various opportunities to consider when setting out to conduct such research (Part III). Finally, in Part IV, I offered a look into the future of language research in marketing, suggesting several areas that may benefit from further exploration. It is my hope that this monograph can be used as a basic guide for beginning researchers who are interested to conduct language research in marketing, or as a summary for more seasoned researchers who already acquired linguistics education and would like to get up to date on current streams in the research of language in marketing.

Acknowledgements

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