The surprising effects of packaging

Many think that it's what is in the box that counts and that presentation is secondary. But this is not necessarily the case, whether we’re talking about gifts or public speaking.

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I have a friend who gives the most beautifully wrapped gifts. Lovingly encased in handmade paper and tied with matching cloth ribbons, her presents always stand out, elegantly reminding both giver and recipient that it is the very act of giving and sharing that is to be treasured, not what’s inside the box.

I was thinking about this talented friend as I struggled clumsily with sheets of supermarket gift wrap and rolls of sticky tape on Christmas Eve. While I may not have my friend’s flair for wrapping gifts, I draw consolation from the fact that much of my professional life is about offering the right packaging. For that is essentially what we interpreters do: repackage a message in another language so that it will have the best possible effect on the recipient.

The importance of a message’s externals is not to be underestimated. Just as the nicely wrapped Christmas gift is doubly appreciated by the recipient, the effectively presented speech is more credible and more likely to be accepted by the listener.

Don’t believe me? To tell you the truth, I wouldn’t have believed it either. But then I came across the results of some recent research revealing our unconscious reactions to just one external aspect of a spoken message: the accent in which it is delivered.

The brain doubts a foreign accent

If it’s all about what a speaker is saying, not how they are saying it, then it shouldn’t matter what sort of accent they have, right? Wrong. Researchers at the University of Chicago have discovered that the brain doubts messages that are delivered in a foreign accent, as Scientific American reported in a recent article:

Non-native accents make speech somewhat more difficult for native speakers to parse and thereby reduces “cognitive fluency” – i.e., the ease with which the brain processes stimuli. And this, they found, causes people to doubt the accuracy of what is said.

This is bad news for proponents of Globish – not to mention for those millions of people around the world who often find themselves obliged to engage in professional and private dealings in a language they do not fully master. Through absolutely no fault of their own, non-native speakers of a language lose credibility every time they open their mouths (I include myself in this group, of course, as much of my day-to-day life is spent speaking Spanish, German or French with a foreign accent).
I’ve heard some anecdotal evidence illustrating this effect in a conference context. Some architect friends tell me that they’ve often seen awards go to firms who had native English speakers present their shortlisted projects to the (native English) jury at English-only competitions. I am convinced that if only these events were held with interpretation, allowing architects from all over the world to present their projects in their own language, the playing field would be levelled and projects would be judged on their architectural merits alone, and not on the architect’s ability to speak English.

The bias against poor packaging exists, even when listeners claim it doesn’t

Many studies have examined what users expect from interpreters. They have tended to show that meeting participants claim to value accuracy of content and use of correct terminology above all else, while assigning less importance to aspects such as voice quality and accents.

However, more recent research appears to show that even users who claim that accent doesn’t matter will unconsciously rate a performance more positively if it is given by a native speaker. Interestingly enough, this effect is seen even when both speeches are identical except for the accent of the speaker. This unconscious bias was explained in a recent post here on this blog:

Different user groups ... were asked to rate different speeches, tweaked for certain features. It turns out that the exact same speech given with a native accent gets a higher score for quality (e.g. using more correct terminology or correct grammar) than the speech with non-native accent.

Here’s another real-life story that illustrates this unconscious – not to mention unfair – bias against poorly packaged messages. Family and friends from various fields of academia have assured me that an academic article written by a native English speaker is much more likely to be accepted for publication in an English-language journal than a paper written by a non-native that is riddled with grammatical errors. In these cases, it is not the quality of the research itself that forms the basis for rejection, but the form in which it is presented.

I’m told this effect can be negated by having native speakers revise papers written by non-native academics: one acquaintance tells me that ever since he started having his research papers revised by a professional, native English-speaking editor, he has not had a single one rejected.

Thinking outside the gift box

Of course, the work of a conference interpreter is not just about repackaging a message in a native accent so that listeners will be more likely to buy it. But the above research showing the link between accents and credibility illustrates just one of the many benefits of allowing speakers at international events to speak their mother tongue. Not only will they have access to the full range of communicative resources in their own language, ensuring that they will be able to express what they want to say and choose how they want to say it, but they won’t have to worry about any unwanted, and unconscious, reactions to the packaging, allowing listeners to focus instead on what is “inside the box”.

In conclusion, I’d invite readers, as they open their gifts this holiday season, to take a moment to think about how packaging permeates many aspects of our lives. Although we are often unaware of it, the effect of good packaging extends far beyond what can be found under the Christmas tree.

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