Shopping while bilingual can make you sick

WSB TV report: Apple discriminates against Persian-speaking customers

I've just found an e-mail from Apple in my spam folder with a ‘personal’ invitation to attend one of their new store openings in Sydney. I'm not going for two reasons: first, Apple has not yet done anything to improve working conditions in their Chinese supplier factories. I keep checking up on Apple's progress towards improving working conditions at ethicalphone.org and might consider their invitation once I see some progress there. The second reason I'm not going is that one of my family languages is Persian and I have no desire of entering potentially discriminatory situations if I can avoid it.

I'm referring to the case of Sahar Sabet, a bilingual (English-Persian) US-American woman who was recently refused the purchase of an ipad in an Apple store in Atlanta, Georgia. According to media reports (e.g., BBC, International Business Times, MSBC), Sahar, a 2nd-generation American with an Iranian background, was shopping in an Apple store together with an uncle visiting from Iran. She had an extensive service interaction about two different versions of ipad with a salesperson there in English, finally made up her mind and was just about to make her purchase, when her uncle asked her in Persian about the price of another product he was looking at. She responded in Persian and, at the sound of another language, the salesperson immediately asked what language they were speaking.

Sahar told him and added helpfully that Persian was a language spoken in Iran. At that the salesperson declared that she could not purchase her ipad "because Iran and the US don't have good relations with each other." The store manager backed the salesperson's decision – made on no other grounds than speaking Persian to another potential customer – and Sahar left the store without her ipad and in tears.

However, she did not just leave it at that but called up Apple's customer relations office, who apologized and recommended ordering an ipad over the internet (if you are not an embodied customer, you can't be discriminated against …). Sahar also called Atlanta's TV news station WSB-TV, who picked up the story and brought it to international attention (in addition to English-language media, I've also seen the story in the German (e.g., Spiegel) and Persian (e.g., BBC Farsi) language media). The statement Sahar made about the incident through her attorney can be found here.

While Sahar chose to speak out about the discrimination she experienced, the National Iranian American Council (NIAC) says that her experience is not unusual. It is not unusual because companies are walking a fine line between either falling foul of civil liberty legislation (discrimination is illegal) or falling foul of strict US export regulations relative to countries subject to broad economic sanctions, such as Iran. So, while it's of course perfectly legal for Apple to sell their products to anyone in the USA (as the State Department was quick to point out after the incident hit the headlines), they are required not to if they have grounds to suspect that the customer might intend to import the product to Iran – an offence carrying heavy penalties, as in this recent case. Given such drastic penalties, it seems that some companies or individual employees reckon that breaching civil liberties legislation is not as bad as breaching export restriction legislation.
Persian-speakers are not the only ones in the USA to experience discrimination in service encounters on the basis of language, as is well documented – the 2nd edition of Rosina Lippi-Green’s *English with an accent has just come out* for anyone who needs a refresher. A recent study (Yoo et al. 2008) reports that 12% of the Asian-Americans they surveyed reported having experienced discrimination on the basis of language in a service encounter (in a health care context) in the past two years. This was more than those who reported that they had experienced discrimination on the basis of race. Even more intriguingly, the researchers found that there was a statistically significant correlation between having experienced language discrimination (above and beyond the effects resulting from having experienced racial discrimination) and health: those who reported having experienced language discrimination in service encounters in the past two years were more likely to suffer from chronic conditions, and this effect increased the longer they had been in the country.

Good on Sahar for kicking up a fuss! Hopefully, her attitude will keep her from getting sick from shopping!