

## Chapter 43

# Foreign Language Display in Advertising from a Psycholinguistic and Sociolinguistic Perspective: A Review and Research Agenda

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### **ABSTRACT**

*When targeting consumers on a global scale, companies make strategic use of languages in their advertising campaigns. This chapter presents an overview of theories and research regarding the effectiveness of the use of foreign languages (foreign language display, FLD) in advertising. The aim is to bring together theories and empirical studies from various domains, and to show principled explanations for the effectiveness of FLD from two perspectives. The first, psycholinguistic perspective examines the way in which foreign languages in advertising are mentally processed; the second, sociolinguistic perspective links the foreign language use to characteristics of the country where the foreign language is typically spoken. This chapter presents empirical evidence for the benefits and drawbacks of FLD, and identifies areas for further research.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the current global economy, businesses target consumers from different nationalities and cultures. In their communication with these consumers, businesses generally have three language strategies at their disposal: standardization, adaptation, or foreign language display (cf. Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 1999). In the case of standardization, one standardized language is used, generally English (Bhatia, 1992), whereas in the case of adaptation, businesses use the language of the local target consumers, including minorities (such as Hispanics in the US, see Luna & Peracchio, 2005; Noriega & Blair, 2008). The foreign language display strategy is one in which a business uses a specific language, such as French or German, to evoke associations of that country. This strategy of foreign language display is “the appropriation of words or phrases from another language [...] used within one’s own social group” (Eastman & Stein 1993, p. 189). An example of foreign language display for car manufacturing is the German slogan ‘Das Auto’ (instead of “The car”) that Volkswagen uses in the USA. In the literature, a number of theories and studies have been presented that addressed the question how effective such foreign language use is.

In this chapter, we make a distinction between theories and studies that fall under a psycholinguistic perspective (addressing how consumers process foreign languages), and theories and studies that fall under a sociolinguistic perspective (addressing how consumers link foreign languages to relevant countries and speakers). The classification of theories and studies under each of these perspectives yields new insights into how and why foreign language display can be effective.

This chapter has three aims:

- Identify claims that have been proposed on the effectiveness of foreign language display, and show how these claims relate to the broad, explanatory frameworks of psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics
- Present a review of the empirical research relating to these claims
- Provide reasoned suggestions for further research resulting from the review

## BACKGROUND

The use and effects of foreign languages in advertising have been studied in a range of different fields, such as international marketing (Krishna & Ahluwalia, 2008), international advertising (Ahn & La Ferle, 2008), business communication (Hornikx, Van Meurs, & De Boer, 2010), applied linguistics (Piller, 2003), sociolinguistics (Haarmann, 1989), and psycholinguistics (Domzal, Hunt, & Kernan, 1995). From these different backgrounds, researchers have proposed a variety of motivations and explanations for the use and effectiveness of foreign languages in advertising. For instance, Kuppens (2010) distinguished three sets of explanations for the use of English in advertising in countries where English is a foreign language: English enables communication with a global community of consumers, English enlarges the linguistic repertoire for advertisers to communicate their message (e.g., English words can be shorter, bilingual word puns can be made), and English may carry cultural connotations such as modernity and internationalism. Santello (2015), as a second example, provides three different explanations to account for differences in effectiveness of language choices in advertising: a foreign language may be more difficult to understand than the consumers’ mother tongue, a foreign language may evoke specific associations, and a foreign language may be perceived as unusual, which may lead to it being evaluated differently than the consumers’ mother tongue.

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