

# SHOULD DUAL-LANGUAGE MESSAGES CONCERN ADVERTISERS? A PILOT STUDY<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the interpretations that consumers have of commercial messages making use of words that can be decoded in more than one language. While many ads, both foreign and domestic, attempt to capitalize on the prestige-value associated with foreign-sounding words and phrases, dual-language words are often used unintentionally. We question whether consumers interpret these messages in the intended way and present the findings of a pilot study designed to investigate the possible repercussions associated with dual-language ads' use.

## INTRODUCTION

As December 31, 1992 approaches, the members of the European Community (EC) are busy attempting to pass laws and directives to achieve true unification for that target date. By 1992, most internal trade barriers are scheduled to be dismantled and common external trade rules will ideally be in effect. It is predicted that not all EC countries will benefit equally from unification. While the poorer nations (usually southern Europe) have much to gain from free trade, they also face competition never seen before from industries in the wealthier nations.

"Perhaps nowhere else is the soul-searching - and anxiety - so deep as it is in Italy" (Revzin 1988). Complaints about the chaos and lackadaisical attitude of the labor force in Italy are commonplace, but the Italians have never really had to worry about anything being done to improve the system until recently. Many predict that the Italian banking, postal service, and construction industry must change in order to survive the post-1992 years. Others comment that every Italian company must become more efficient and "European" in order to compete effectively.

Therefore, especially in Italy, advertisers must present their products and services in the most favorable light and try for a minimum level of misinterpretation. While little, if any literature exists concerning the subject, even a casual tourist in Italy will notice the use of English language expressions and words in Italian advertising. Some (Dunlop 1989; Mewshaw 1988) have hypothesized about the reasons for this influx of English into Italian ads, but few have come to a conclusion as to why it is done. Ray, Ryder, and Scott (1991) propose explanations for the purposeful use of foreign words in print advertising.

Examples of commercial phrases written completely in English abound. While living in Italy recently, one of the authors of this paper recalls noting billboards with "Dr. Pepper: Welcome from America" and "Merry Christmas from Marlboro Country." Research on the effectiveness of these ads in a foreign language aimed at a mass Italian audience is almost nonexistent. Why would Italian advertisers advertise in English when the majority of the intended market does not know the language?

Even more interesting are the phrases in "Itagliano" (Dunlop 1989) or "Englotalian" (Mewshaw 1988). These are slogans or names of products that make use of both Italian and English. Dunlop (1989) mentions an extremely interesting example of a mixture of the two languages in a lingerie shop window in Parma, Italy.

Printed decoratively across the front of the nightie was the apparently nonsense legend: 'Happiness in estate'. The perpetrator had no idea that estate is an English word, but was using the Italian word

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estate (three syllables), meaning 'summer'. (Dunlop 1989, p. 33)

Italy is used as an example setting throughout this paper mostly for matters of convenience. The authors have more intimate knowledge of dual-language advertising in this country than in others.

Certainly similar examples exist in other cultures as well, for example "Franglais" (the mixture of French and English). English names for products and businesses are quite common in many places in Europe and Latin America (Harris, Sturm, Klassen, and Bechtold 1986). Americans do this also. One example is when marketers include the use of foreign accents in a product name or advertisement to make the message appear "classy" or sophisticated.

Often, languages borrow words from other languages to incorporate into a monolingual speech community. This is done mostly for prestige, as the use of such words is perceived as sophisticated and cosmopolitan. Often, the use of the foreign language is nothing more than code-switching which is the use of two languages within the same discourse by fluent bilinguals. A description of these linguistic concepts as explanations for the purposeful use of foreign words in print advertising can be found in Ray, Ryder and Scott (1991). However, neither borrowing or code-switching theory can adequately explain the interpretation of dual-language words or phrases.

## METHODOLOGY

While the use of dual-language advertising appears to be rare, we felt that it is, in fact, an issue which warrants investigation. After all, misinterpretation of ads is so high to begin with; the unintended misinterpretation of a dual-language ad could very well be disastrous.

A written survey (translations of key phrases appear in Appendix A) was distributed to participants in an industrial city of Northern Italy. Their ages ranged from 19 to 25 and most would be considered to be from upper middle-class families. Possible advertising phrases were constructed with words that could be either interpreted to be Italian or English, but used in conjunction with other English words in the phrase. The example "happiness in estate" mentioned earlier was included. Phrases were written to include those which began with the dual-language word and those

which began with obvious English words. Also, strictly Italian advertising phrases were included in the list. A convenience sample was chosen of natives who were known to have studied English during the past several years. In order to investigate awareness of the dual-nature of some of the words, it was necessary to have respondents who were fairly fluent in the English language. Ten respondents were chosen from those enrolled in one of the most prestigious business schools in Italy. Knowledge of the English language is mandatory for them.

An American student interviewer who had daily interaction with the respondents individually handed each respondent the survey and asked him (all respondents were male) to read the instructions and then to indicate what level of English he felt he had. Then the respondent was asked to read each of the eight phrases. The interviewer recorded whether the dual-language word highlighted in bold was pronounced in Italian or English in her notes. Then the respondent wrote some brief words describing what the phrase meant to him. The data were then returned to the authors in the United States.

All of the respondents were male (most students enrolled in the school are male) and they indicated that their perceived level of English is between poor and good. The question was worded so that they were to respond to a seven point scale with one meaning an excellent command of English and seven indicating a poor command of English. All chose either four, five, or six. If these students did not feel that their English ability is excellent, the general Italian population certainly would not either. In fact, only one percent of Italians claim to read English fluently (Mitchell 1984).

One may note that the survey environment was very English oriented (the nationality of the interviewer and the instructions). Ideally, experimental designs with many more respondents would be set up to ascertain what effects various variables could have on the respondents' propensities to interpret the word in one language or another. Such experimental variables could be level of English ability, the positioning of the survey in an "Italian" setting versus an English dominated setting, inclusion of visual stimuli, and

others. We felt it necessary to begin with the respondents' language abilities being as similar as possible and to limit the number of variables involved in this preliminary study.

## DISCUSSION

### Written Interpretations

Substantial disagreement exists as to how the various phrases were interpreted. Even respondents disagreed in regard to the everyday advertising phrases written completely in Italian. One, which can be translated literally to mean "a world of ideas" was interpreted to mean anything from "the excitement of discovery" to "fantasy." The phrase which when translated means "the taste says the truth" was listed as meaning "sensitivity," "the world in the mouth," and "truth is not always a sensation." Even some nonsense meanings were given, such as "class is not water." We believe that the nonsense meanings were more of a "guess" at meaning instead of some antagonism aimed at the interviewer or the research since relations between the Italian students and the Americans working at the school had been friendly in the past.

We should not be surprised that the language used to write these interpretations was Italian. However, one respondent did choose to write in English, even when writing about Italian phrases. Interestingly, he was one of the respondents who claimed to have poor English skills.

Two phrases were included that began with the dual-language words. "Come young come old" was generally interpreted to be something related to age or time. The key word "come" ("eat" in Italian) did not alter the perceived meanings and in fact was completely ignored. The phrase "dire truths" was generally described with the word "truth" in mind; however, one respondent did perceive the word "dire" to be the Italian word for "to speak."

The phrases which began with English words which included the dual-language words later were divided regarding the interpretation of the key word. For example, "fame" was perceived by some to be fame or glory, but by others to be hunger. "Sale" was perceived mostly as salt, but by one person as a sale. Another ignored the key word, and focused on the English words indicating that the statement was a question. "Estate" was interpreted by most to mean a

season of the year, or specifically, summertime. Only one perceived it as meaning a piece of land.

### Spoken

Sometimes, the respondents articulated the key word in both English and Italian, but English was the language used first with only one exception. Even those who wrote their interpretations in Italian, spoke the key word in English when asked to say the phrases out loud. Interestingly, one respondent who interpreted "I have fame" to be "I'm hungry" wrote the interpretation in English and spoke the key word in English first.

## CONCLUSIONS

Those who engage in advertising research would be the first to admit that different consumers interpret different ads in different ways. Here, we have investigated a possible problem which may enter into international advertising more and more - that of using words or phrases with different meanings in more than one language. Respondents in this study had no consistent interpretation of phrases with dual-language words. Even when primed with a more Italian or more English context, many discrepancies were found in interpretation. Sometimes, the dual-language word will simply be ignored, but more often the word does promote a variety of interpretations of the message.

While the use of a foreign phrase or key word might promote attention to the ad, advertisers should be warned to be wary of dual-language words. If they are used intentionally, research should first be conducted on how they are interpreted by the majority of consumers and if they affect recall and the evaluation of the product advertised. Some dual-language words may be more likely to be interpreted in both languages if they are part of a "basic vocabulary," words that have a high probability of being in the low-level speakers' repertoire (Carter and McCarthy 1988).

This study is only a small, preliminary step using a homogeneous, atypical group of consumers. While only indicating poor to good English skills, these respondents would have better knowledge of English than the general Italian population.

Future research should investigate whether monolinguals display similar reactions as those with multilingual skills.

### INTEGRATION INTO THE MARKETING CURRICULUM

While dual-language advertising is a field which has never been seriously researched, either by marketers or linguists, we certainly cannot make the case that it is an essential topic in our marketing classes. However, the case can easily be made for the incorporation of an understanding of linguistic principles that are necessary for the well-rounded marketer. Many of us are lamenting that we try to incorporate international issues into our curriculum, yet most universities still have no foreign language requirement. Research is being conducted on how an understanding of linguistic principles can explain some aspects of marketing (Harris et al. 1986; O'Shaughnessy and Holbrook 1988). Sociolinguists over the years have emphasized that not only is language a reflection of one's culture, but the structure of one's language can influence the way that one looks at the world. In short, the tie between linguistics and marketing exists. We believe that this tie should be emphasized more in our research and in our classroom experiences.

If a reader is interested in discussing the dual-language issue in his or her class, the experience can be enjoyable for both the professor and the students. We have briefly discussed the issue in our classes concentrating on words which can be interpreted in both Spanish and English. Many students in several parts of the United States are bilingual Spanish and English speakers and we have found that they appreciate this recognition from professors. Many instructors of business courses fail to take advantage of these students' expertise since language issues usually do not play a role in our curriculum. We have asked these bilingual speakers to suggest dual-language words which they can think of and to suggest ways which research could be conducted using the U.S. hispanic population's reaction to ads that might make use of these words. Some suggested dual-language phrases have been:

- the clock strikes once (eleven)
- dinner pan (bread)
- chicken pie (foot)
- come here (eat)

Since Spanish may be the foreign language that monolingual English speakers are most likely to have studied, this can lead to discussions in which more than just the bilinguals can participate. And, from our perspective, the exercise will have been worthwhile if it simply produces a discussion of the importance of language understanding in being a well-rounded marketer.

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## APPENDIX A - LIST OF PHRASES

### Mixed phrases

the thief is **male**

I have **fame**

where is the **sale**

happiness in **estate**

come young **come old**

**dire** truths

### Italian phrases

un mondo di **idee**

il gusto dice il **vero**

### Translation of word in bold<sup>1</sup>

bad

hunger

salt

summer

how

to speak

a world of ideas

its taste will tell the truth

1.The translations did not appear on the survey.