

Screens, Billboards, and Words: Advertising in Whose Language

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A great deal of research has been conducted on public language usage in Cameroon (Echu, 2003a, 2003b; Chumbow, 1996; Wolf, 2001) but very little has been done on advertising. Focus has been on administration, education, and politics. Unlike in South Africa where the 11 official languages are accorded equal status and used in major sectors of the economy, in Cameroon, English and French dominate the landscape. Consequently, there is discontent among the speakers of the marginalized languages, who argue that the exclusive use of English and French accords these European languages unfair advantage. Leaving out their tongues denies them access to information and participation in economic development. This qualitative study examines the current state of advertising in Cameroon and South Africa using a questionnaire, interviews, and observations for data collection. The findings suggest that in order to improve relations between speakers of the indigenous languages in Cameroon, especially those who speak neither English nor French, and speakers of the official languages, advertising should include the use of the major indigenous languages, and perhaps Cameroon Pidgin English too. To affect equity, the hegemonic Cameroonian advertising should take a leaf from the dynamic multilingual practices of South African advertising.

Keywords: advertising, multilingualism, multiculturalism, language choice

Introduction and Background to the Study

Language is the articulation of beliefs and is used to express the way we feel about something. South Africa and Cameroon have rich historical and language backgrounds. With the Dutch settlement in 1652, Afrikaans and English were used in schools (1925)—this implied ongoing mother-tongue education for white and some of the so-called “coloured” people. African languages only got a degree of recognition in policies during the apartheid era in South Africa where mother-tongue education was proposed for at least a couple of years. The Bantu Education Act (1953) stipulated that black learners should receive mother-tongue teaching in lower and higher primary grades with transition to English and Afrikaans thereafter. Since Africans cannot undo the damages of the past, they should therefore strive to prevent future damages. During the colonial era, many of the colonialists believed Africans lived in tribes and tried as much as they could to divide them along those lines (tribal lines). In the South African context, tribes were separated from one another in what was referred to as the Bantustans along tribal and regional boundaries. This system was however dismantled with the advent of democracy and majority rule in South Africa in the early 1990s.

According to Echu (2003a, p. 1), Cameroon on its part is a linguistically diverse and multicultural society just

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like South Africa with over 247 indigenous languages, two official languages (French and English), and a lingua franca (CPE (Cameroon Pidgin English)). These indigenous languages are not adequately used in administration, education, politics, and advertising. Most of the information is in the European languages—English and French—as displayed on screens (Internet and television) and billboards at the expense of the indigenous languages. South Africa has 11 official languages accorded equal status by the 1996 Constitution.

This comparative study examines the language and advertising situation in Cameroon by comparing it with the South African example. It also looks at the various ways and means through which the Cameroonian advertising could take a leaf from the South African example. This comparative study is purely exploratory making use of the qualitative method of data collection. For the purpose of this study, data were collected by using the following instruments: a questionnaire, face-to-face interviews, observation, and photographs on billboards, using a digital camera to establish the current situation in both contexts. The main aim was to establish the current practice in the domain of advertising in both countries and propose intervention measures that could be used to address the situation currently prevailing in Cameroon. The data collected were analyzed to ensure reliability of information gathered on the field, checking data against conclusions made, interviews and other data sources.

Theoretical Framework

Inhabitants and citizens in South Africa may feel happy to express themselves in their tongues unlike in Cameroon. This therefore brings some discontent amongst speakers of the various local languages in Cameroon. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the celebrated literary critic and writer, speaking on the SABC 2 (South African Broadcasting Corporation) on August 22, 2010, believed "If Africans know or are able to speak isiZulu, Kikuyu, Duala, Basaa and other European languages, they will become more powerful, but if they can speak or know all other languages and cannot speak their own language/s, that is enslavement". The study therefore critically questions the present state of affairs while proposing, suggesting, and recommending the inclusion of other indigenous language(s) in key sectors in Cameroon where English and French are predominantly used. To affect equity, the hegemonic Cameroonian advertising should take a leaf from the dynamic multilingual practices of South African advertising.

The use of minority language(s), accents, and dialects in advertising can be seen to be the result of advertisers attempting to speak to people in their own language (Kelly-Holmes, 2005, p. xii). Advertising has traditionally communicated messages to consumers with strong local and national identities. However, increasingly, products, producers, advertising agencies, and the media are becoming internationalized. In the development of strategies that appeal to a large multilingual consumer base, advertising language takes on new "multilingual" features.

According to Luna and Peracchio (2005, p. 760), code-switching is the insertion of a foreign word or expression into a sentence (e.g., into an advertising slogan), resulting in a mixed-language message. This practice is common among bilinguals and multilinguals around the world. They further hold that minority language slogans switching to the majority language result in greater persuasion than majority language slogans switching to the minority language. The question one may ask is what are the characteristics that qualify a language or give it majority or minority status. In Cameroon, the vast majority of citizens are not literate enough to decipher information in French/English considered the majority language(s). Using English and French within Duala,

Basaa, and Ffulde would rather create a positive effect than vice versa.

Culture therefore becomes very important in creating this positive effect in advertising. Culture is the sum total of a people's way of doing things. Language is an aspect of culture, and denigrating African languages to secondary roles on the linguistic and advertising discourse and landscape in Cameroon and South Africa becomes very severe if business has to thrive and survive. Luna and Peracchio (2005, p. 760) believed an individual's choice of language signaled a specific social identity and/or belonging to a particular community. The language(s) a person speaks would make him/her feel a sense of belonging in a specific context. Forcing colonial languages onto people constitutes enslavement and not promoting or advancing the culture of the people. Ager (2001, p. 14) maintained culture was important in that the social norms and patterns of politeness all formed part of the socio-cultural practice of particular societies.

Advertising as Communication

Advertising plays a very important role in the growth and development of a country. Cronje, du Toit, Motlatla, and de K Marais (2003) pointed out, "The business world is a complex system of individuals and business organisations operating in a market economy" (p. 3). It involves the activity of transforming resources into products and services in order to meet the needs of the people. These products and services are offered to the market in exchange for profit. Business is the result of activities related to meeting the needs of people in a market economy. For this business to reach its potential consumers, advertisers must get the products and services to the masses. This is done through a communication process that involves more than one stakeholder. Marketers and advertisers need to come into play in order for the business process to be complete. Cronje et al. (2003, p. 329) further maintained advertising can be regarded as the process of informing, persuading, and reminding the consumer of some of their basic needs. Consumers could be aware of the existence of certain products or services on the market but may not find the need to get them, because no one has taken the effort to convince them to obtain the product and how vital such products could be to their lives. By getting to know about the product, services, and ideas, consumers would be interested in what is advertized and purchase them. This will increase sales and contribute in the growth of the business and the economy. It is therefore the duty of the advertiser, copy-writer, and art designer to be able to design the right advert for the right audience. The job of the advertiser Cronje et al. (2003) maintained comprises four key elements that can be used in a specific combination to communicate with consumers. These four important elements are: (1) advertising; (2) personal selling; (3) sales promotion; and (4) publicity.

If these four elements are not considered by the advertiser, the product(s), service(s), and idea(s) may not be known to the outside world. It is therefore the job of the advertiser to be able to integrate all these elements in any campaign in order to sell the products, services, and ideas being advertized, persuade the consumer to buy the product, market and promote the product, and publicize the product to a wider audience. To better understand the roles advertising and promotion play in the marketing and communication process, it is important to examine the marketing function. Marketing comprises a wide range of aspects and individual activities such as sales, advertising, or retailing activities. The AMA (American Marketing Association) which represents marketing professionals in the United States and Canada defines marketing as: "the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods, and services to create exchanges that satisfy

individuals and organisational objectives” (G. E. Belch & M. A. Belch, 2004, p. 7).

Effective advertising requires that managers recognize and realize the interdependence of such activities as sales and promotion and how they can be combined to develop an advertising programme. Advertising plays an important role in the exchange process by informing consumers of an organisational product, service, or idea and convincing them of its ability to satisfy their needs. This process can only be effectively carried out if the communities and role players have a common language to convey the message to readers and consumers. Advertising, as a form of communication, helps in creating this awareness and interest. G. E. Belch and M. A. Belch (2004, p. 8) were of the opinion that many companies must recognize and acknowledge the need to integrate their various communication efforts, such as media advertising, sales promotion, and public relations to achieve more effective advertising. For goods or services to get to the market, there is need for their promotion, and a good advertising and promotion campaign is a *sine-qua-non* to the success of the goods and services proposed. Promotion has been defined by G. E. Belch and M. A. Belch (2004) as, “the coordination of all seller-initiated efforts to set up channels of information and persuasion in order to sell goods and services or promote an idea” (p. 16) such as selling the image of a political party or the brand name of businesses established in a particular locale. The incorporation and proper use of these items could boost sales and the activities of the businesses considerably. Promotional strategies also play an important role in advertising programmes of companies as they attempt to communicate with and sell products and services to their consumers.

Advertising and Economic Growth

Companies and businesses need to incorporate advertising strategies in their business plans for growth to occur. And for growth to increase, companies have to pump in money in the advertising sector to get their products, services, and ideas known to the public. Van der Wurff, Bakker, and Picard (2008, p. 29) held that companies that wanted to have their share of the growing economic pie used advertising to attract new customers. The impact of economic development on advertising varies according to expenditure. The more companies and businesses spend on advertising, the more likely they will make more profit. The profit made by these companies and businesses could lead to economic development. Economic development is simply the increase in the standard of living in a nation’s population with sustained growth from a simple low-income economy to a high-income economy. When sales and output increase, the standard of living of the citizens may increase as there will be more money pumped into the economy.

For business to thrive, all four elements (advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, and publicity) have to work together to convey the message to the target audience. Cook (1994, p. 218) was of the opinion that the intention of advertising was the constant desire to attract attention. Features considered typical of advertisements are often pointedly abandoned, thus defeating the effort of arresting attention. If all the elements of a good advert are not taken into consideration, the advert may end up not meeting the intended purpose or objective. Cook (1994, p. 219) believed that adverts were usually “unrealistic” as they always portrayed a bland (dull and unexciting) and problem-free world, eulogizing a product, stressing its advantages, while ignoring or distracting attention from its disadvantages. There is therefore no way the advertiser would want to persuade and at the same time show the disadvantages, dark side, or negative aspects of what is being advertized. Consumers may only come to discover the negative aspects of the product later on but if convinced of its effectiveness, the negative

aspects may not deter them—consumers—from continuously using the product. This will however depend on the seriousness of the negative aspects on the consumers. Minor cases may not affect or change the consumers as they may continue using the products and services.

Not all adverts are unrealistic as some may be very real (e.g., images of real life individuals put on adverts to catch the attention of consumers), and consumers must give a close look at the adverts before deciding on whether to buy the products or not. By inserting images of individuals and celebrities which consumers can identify and recognize, consumers will get interested in the products, services, and ideas. In the advert below taken from a billboard in the city of Douala, Cameroon, the advertiser portrays and presents a cross section of the Cameroonian population and reason why the citizens should consume mayonnaise (see Figure 1). Even though it is a foreign product, children, women, and men are represented on the advert which shows that everyone can consume the product. This advert is full of realism as it presents and portrays a typical African or Cameroonian society irrespective of gender and class using the product being advertized. There is nothing unreal in this advert and consumers may only realize the negative effects after its consumption. The only disadvantage on the advert is that it speaks only to a minority and privileged elite (those who are able to read and write English and French). There are no insertions of some of the indigenous languages spoken in Douala for the common man to identify themselves in the advert.



Figure 1. Advertising and the Cameroonian society.

Advertising and Realism

In society, “realism” in art is generally considered to be a positive quality (Cook, 1994, p. 180). Cook (1994, p. 219) maintained that advertising had been criticized as “unrealistic” and therefore automatically bad. And it is true that advertising does not generally represent the world as it is. Its portrayal of home life, for example, does not reflect the proportion of single-parent families, or of gays and lesbians (Cook, 1994, p. 219). Consumers should not therefore expect to have everything they want displayed in the advert as advertising space could be very costly and the advertiser would want to contract and use very few words to mean very many things at the same time. Consumers most often have to struggle to decipher and understand the meaning of adverts at first sight. They may lose interest in the adverts and the advertiser may be called upon to go back to their script to simplify things for the uninitiated.

The formulation of the marketing message in advertisements in the different media requires careful consideration given that advertising plays a key role in economic growth and development of a country. An advertisement in the print media may consist of several key components, namely the heading, the illustration, the copy, the logo design, the tag line, or the slogan. The heading is to introduce or capture the attention of consumers, the illustration is to explain and give more meaning to the advert, while the final copy is the end product of the advert in its complete form as it is sent to the public for consumption. The logo design in an advert acts as the company's public face and therefore should speak for itself, making an impact on potential clients at first sight. A great logo design can take a company to the next level by portraying the right visual image to clients without any confusion. This will form a lasting and memorable impression for a company and business. The tag line or slogan in an advertisement is a memorable phrase that sums up the tone of a product or service or to reinforce the consumers' memory of a product or service. A good tag line or slogan may stay longer in the minds of consumers, while poorly structured slogans may instead deter addressees. The designing of adverts following this structure should be done to attract the consumers' attention and deliver the most important appeal, offering the reason why the product should be bought. Buying the products, getting interested in the services and ideas of the companies and businesses will cause them to stay in businesses. Continuing the business will also create employment and improve on the standard of living of the citizens. If this is done, advertising could achieve its role as a business tool in society. Vestergaard and S  hr  der (1995, p. 28) shared the same opinion as they believed adverts usually consisted of a headline, a body copy, and a slogan (plus an illustration). To them, advertising does not tell that consumers need its products as such, but rather that the products can help consumers obtain something else or something new on the market (Vestergaard & S  hr  der, 1995, p. 29). If advertising fails to convince consumers to get what they need, then the purpose of the campaign would have failed. Advertisers need to properly study the market situation and context or society in which they operate to be able to meet and satisfy consumers regarding their needs. By so doing, copy writers, art designers, and advertisers would have been able to use advertising successfully and meet the needs and demands of consumers who could be in millions just waiting for that advert. If this is done, advertising could achieve its role as a tool for persuasion in society and in the economic growth and development of a country.

Advertising and Persuasion

Advertisers use persuasion as a tool to convince readers and consumers to be attracted to products and services. The purpose of advertising is to persuade consumers or readers to purchase or get interested in products, ideas, and services provided by different companies and businesses. Language has always been or played an important role in this process. For ads to succeed in this role, the culture of the people for whom the ad is intended must be studied and understood. Linton in Caruana (2005, p. 236) defined culture as the configuration of learned behaviour and the results of behaviour, the component elements of which were shared and transmitted by members of a particular society. Culture being the sum total of a people's ways of doing things, ads should also be proposed to them in their languages as language constitutes an aspect of culture.

Caruana (2005, p. 236) held that given the deep social roots and pervasive influence of culture, the extent to which a message grounded in another social heritage of one community needed to be questioned and understood. It has been argued that since culture and traditions differ from one community and society to another, the fact that

a company and business has been successful in one context does not mean that they must do the same in another society. A cursory look at a people's way of doing things and their culture will be important in doing business. Experience has shown that people will better understand adverts and messages/information in their L1 (first language) than when put in their L2 (second language). Nelson Mandela in one of his quotable quotes maintained that "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart" (Retrieved from http://www.thinkexist.com/english/author/x/author_3763_1.htm). Given that English is increasingly dominating the world and used as the language of business and science, the challenge would be to find out what language to use in advertising in contexts and societies where citizens can neither read nor write colonial languages forced on them as official languages.

According to the National Education Policy Act (Act 21 of 1996) of the Republic of South Africa, "... Being multilingual should be a defining characteristic of being South African". It is constructed also to counter any particularistic ethnic chauvinism or separatism through mutual understanding. The constitution of the Republic of South Africa gives equal status to all official languages but little is said about language use in advertising. Even though this is a constitutional requirement, English and Afrikaans are still dominant in advertising as seen on billboards. Such is also the case in Cameroon where English and French dominate the advertising landscape. The 1996 Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon only mentions the "protection and promotion" of indigenous languages but nothing is said as to their use in advertising and other key business sectors.

Methodology

This empirical investigation focuses on screens (television and the Internet), billboards, and the words used in passing on advertising messages to readers and consumers. The target is language used in advertising in South Africa and Cameroon and what should be the appropriate language(s) to use in multilingual and multicultural contexts like Cameroon and South Africa.

In order to test and validate the language situation and use in the sector, a questionnaire was designed and sent out to respondents in Douala, Cameroon; a semi-structured face-to-face interview session was conducted with some managers involved in the marketing and communication departments of three business ventures in Mafikeng (South Africa) and Douala (Cameroon). Questions included in the semi-structured face-to-face interviews were designed to investigate and to know what guided them in their choice of the language(s) of advertising, audience response during advertising campaigns, difficulties and challenges faced, and envisaged solutions to these challenges. In South Africa, some ads on billboards were examined and ads on screens (television, Internet) to check recall and language use while comparing it to the Cameroonian context and situation.

Context

The context of the study is Douala—Cameroon and Mafikeng—South Africa. Cameroon is a bilingual country with two official languages—English and French—and a lingua franca (CPE). It is also home to some 247 indigenous languages with Duala, Fulfulde, Ewondo, and Basaa as the languages of wider communication. South Africa has 11 official languages accorded equal status by virtue of the 1996 Constitution. Out of the 11 official languages, nine are local languages accorded official status and showing strong African and cultural influence. A vast majority of the population in Cameroon is uneducated and may not be able to express

themselves in English and French and therefore need to bring in some of the languages of wider communication onto the advertising landscape in Cameroon and to close this linguistic gap and barrier in the sector.

Discussion

The focus of the paper is Douala (Cameroon) and Mafikeng (South Africa). These are two cities that present similar characteristics due to their multilingual and multicultural natures. According to Halliday (1979), "A city is a place of talk" (p. 154). It is built and held together by language. Even though it is qualified as a place where much of the talking and conversation take place, city-dwellers do not spend all of their time and energies communicating with one another but they (city-dwellers) also try to reassert and reshape the society through their conversations. City-dwellers constantly make reference to the institutions, the times and places, the patterns of movements, and the types of social relationships that are characteristic of city life (Halliday, 1979, p. 154). In most cities, policy- and decision-makers usually make a distinction between minority as opposed to majority language. This is to create class distinction and the linguistic divide in the cities or the country. Policy- and decision-makers fail to understand that if a "speech community" (Gumperz, 1968) is a heterogeneous unit, showing diversity not only between one individual, advertising language ought to and should take into consideration the various individuals and the languages that make up that speech community.

According to Luna and Peracchio (2005, p. 761), the term majority (vs. minority language) denotes the language spoken by the group that holds the political, cultural, and economic power within a country. Grosjean in Luna and Peracchio (2005, p. 761) held that majority languages tended to be associated with more positive features than minority languages. In Cameroon, English and French could be considered as the majority languages and command power in the country. Though languages handed down by the colonial masters, French is even more dominant than English again as it is spoken in eight of the 10 provinces that make up the political configuration of the country.

This is manifested again by its frequent and dominant use and appearance on screens, billboards in the advertising sector in Cameroon. This trend could be reversed and redressed, adjusted by the introduction and use of indigenous languages in the sector. Fulfulde, a mega language and one of the languages of wider communication spoken in Cameroon, could be inserted into some of the ads that feature in Cameroon. There is certainly a risk in doing this as other languages that do not enjoy the same status as Fulfulde may become extinct or die due to the lack of speakers. Given that most of the languages in Cameroon are spoken languages (without written alphabets and not standardised), policy- and decision-makers, linguists inclusive, could also endeavour to give the languages written form and work towards their standardisation.

Kelly-Holmes (2005, p. 107) believed advertising today was expected to speak to people in their own language. If one speaks to readers and consumers in a foreign language, one would be appealing to their senses/minds but if one were to speak to them in their own language, one would certainly be appealing to their whole self and body. Kelly-Holmes (2005, p. 108) further maintained that one result of speaking to people in their own language "has been the growing degree of 'multi-voicedness'", *a la* Bakhtin, in advertising something that is reflected in the greater diversity of accents and dialects now used in advertising compared with a few decades ago. Experience has shown that most text producers/copy writers and art directors would prefer to advertize in English and French or the standardized languages for fear that they may not have a market or readers

if messages are presented in the tongues of the local population. It is true businesses do not only advertize for the local market but also eye the international market. This could be justifiable as the big spenders are normally and usually in the advanced and developed countries.

Parallel to this has been a move towards some recognition of minority language rights in education and other spheres, and advertisers, too, have come to learn the pragmatic value of speaking the languages of minority groups as Kelly-Holmes (2005, p. 108) maintained. Text producers have been able to overcome this problem by resorting to code-switching, code-mixing, or even alternation.

Advertisers should opt for indigenous language marketing campaigns to address the languages gaps and needs of the local population though also targeting at the same time the wider markets beyond the borders. Kelly-Homes (2005, p. 110) suggested that as Internet usage becomes more general and less exclusive, linguistic diversity increases on the Internet as is the case with the website of the North West University, Mafikeng Campus. Internet users are able to access information in three of the 11 official languages of the Republic of South Africa (see Figure 2). This makes users feel and identify themselves with the university contrary to what obtains in the University of Buea-Cameroon where information is only in English and French to the exclusion of speakers of indigenous languages.



Figure 2. Advertising and multilingualism on the North-West University website.

In the University of Buea, Cameroon website is predominantly English due to its Anglo-Saxon character; lessons are predominantly in English and this explains why its website is solely in English. The home page of the website of the North-West University, Mafikeng Campus, welcomes visitors in three official languages (see Figure 2) spoken in South Africa (English, Setswana, and Afrikaans). Residents and citizens of the province are not left out in the discourse. International visitors of the website also have English to help them out. The website of the University of Buea does not make use of any indigenous language thereby leaving out the uneducated masses in the discourse. On the other hand, the University of Yaounde I website is predominantly French with the following on its homepage: “L’excellence académique à l’Université de Yaoundé I (Academic excellence at the University of Yaounde I)”.

If television and Internet ads make use of some mega languages, information will no longer be reserved for the minority and privileged elite but will open up access and space to other users and other languages. Kelly-Holmes (2005, p. 111) maintained that by speaking to consumers in many tongues, the multilingualism of the country would become even harder for policy-makers and individuals to ignore when it became present in

media on a national scale. This may have significant spin offs and greater awareness of the situation and a gradual “normalising” of multilingualism. Cameroon, being a multilingual and multicultural context with official bilingualism in practice and the introduction of major indigenous languages on the advertising landscape, could also be a plus. This encourages and promotes linguistic “diversity in a country”. Countries should therefore have an official language policy that should be able to address the language needs of all language groups in the country.

Conclusions

It is hoped that this study would assist decision-makers in future policy developments relating to advertising in both multilingual contexts, i.e., South Africa and Cameroon. Packaging, labels, and brand names ought to be in the language of the masses rather than in a language of a selected few.

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