

DECODING LINGUISTIC INFLUENCE ON CONSUMERISM

(A PILOT STUDY: THE CASE OF NORTHERN HARYANA)

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ABSTRACT

The prime objective of this study is to understand whether the languages used on consumer products influence the mood of a buyer in terms of buying a product or not. Using the *unstructured interview* as a primary data gathering tool, perceptions of 50 respondents were elicited about linguistic influence on their decisions of buying any consumer products. Descriptive statistics and analytic induction were used to analyze the collected data. The study revealed several striking facts as to the choice of buyers while buying a consumer product.

KEYWORDS: Languages, Primary Data, Statistic & Consumer

INTRODUCTION

While promoting a consumer product, a manufacturer confronts with a pair of dualities, namely: localization and globalization of the product. Although, the need of using the English language in Indian market is more intensified as globalization is the agenda of the time, several multinational companies have started localizing their products using local lingo. If Indian consumers continue to be tempted to accepting English as marketing lingua franca of India, it would flagrantly contravene the Indian interest and adversely affect Indian culture and identity.

In Indian scenario, we find that packaging and labeling regulation in India permits English and/or Hindi mandatorily. To promote Hindi and regional languages on consumer products, the HRD ministry suggested that all goods and products sold in the country, irrespective of where they have been manufactured, may soon have labels and instructions in Hindi and another regional language (Chopra, 2016). Despite all the circulars forwarded by the government bodies to promote local Indian languages, English is becoming the market lingua franca for manufacturers, consumers, and advertisers in India as every second consumer product shows its logo, brand-caption, and instruction-for-use in English. India is a country where the Indian business world conducts its affairs, mainly in English according to international translation agency Kwint essential (Smith, 2014). Quality language localization is not just translating the content of a mobile application or website to a new language; it involves taking into account the idiosyncratic social and cultural nuances and sensitivities that help the consumer feel safe and secure with using or buying the business product or service.

In the current scenario, a contradiction remains here that even if English has penetrated Indian consumer market unprecedentedly, only 25 % of Indian population has desirable proficiency in English. Pertinently, Mayflower (2015) also observes that India, which is rich in the regions, dialects, states, and cultures, necessitates localization because not every Indian individual is comfortable using English. This is the point of departure for this study as it frames its statement of the research problem as follows.

Due to lack of information in regional languages on consumer products, rural consumers (constituting 75% population of India) not only fail to understand the utility of a vast range of consumer products but also feel compelled to buy a product.

The stated problem finds its place in some of the findings made by Hegde (2016) and Chopra (2016). According to Hegde, although, we have multilingual customer care centers, we are still deprived of multilingual translations of necessary information on a consumer product as translation and localization in India have simply stopped at the marketing stage. He further adds that as growth in first-tier cities slows down, we need to understand the rural and the suburban consumer better and cater accordingly. Similarly, Chopra (2016) states that most products sold in India carry labels and instructions only in English. Given the statement of the research problem, the study necessitates framing a research question as follows.

Does the language used on consumer products orient buyers towards consumerism¹?

METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed research design as it not only assessed the perception of the respondents, but also the degree of their opinions about consumerism.

Subjects and Sampling of the Study

The subjects of this study were 30 respondents selected through purposive sampling techniques. Of the 30 respondents 15 were selected from a rural background and 15 from an urban background. The purposive sampling (often used in perception study to select subjects deliberately) was used with the assumption that the selected small sample will be typical or representative of the whole. Thus, the elicited perceptions of 30 respondents on languages used in consumer products can be viewed as representative of a larger population.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

This study used only one data gathering tool, namely an *unstructured interview*. Unstructured interview allows the respondents to answer freely and the researcher to probe and explore the exact and related facts as they came up during the interview. It was used to collect data in the form of perceptions (viewpoints) of the rural and urban respondents towards language use of consumer product. As for data analysis, the gathered data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and analytic induction.

PERCEPTIONS OF RESPONDENTS TOWARDS LANGUAGES USED ON CONSUMER PRODUCTS

This section discusses the findings elicited in response to the stated research question. In doing so, the perceptions of 30 respondents (15 from rural and 15 from urban backgrounds) were elicited about language-use of consumer products. The following are the key observations.

¹ The term consumerism has been operationally defined here to denote the state of mind in which a consumer is evoked to buy or not to buy a product by the face value, especially, by the languages used on the product.

- Almost all the rural respondents admitted that the use of English on any consumer product had evoked not only a fancy for the product, but also implied that the product is of good quality.
- English proved to be the second mother tongue for the urban respondents and thereby having a strong liking for the consumer products whose *logos*, *brand-captions*, and *instructions* are written in English.
- On the one hand, 65% of the rural respondents (though prosperous) showed a kind of fancy for buying English brand products to enhance their social identity; on the other, about 35% of rural respondents were found unconcerned about language(s) used on the products. They were more concerned about the popularity of the brand. If the brand is famous, language becomes immaterial to them.
- Nearly, 12% of rural respondents stated that they purchased their convenience products by price rather than languages(s) used on them.
- A sizable number (55%) of rural respondents wished to have their consumer products translated into local languages for better comprehension of the products.
- 35% of rural respondents were of the opinion that they love buying a product whose specifications are written primarily in their own languages or secondarily in Hindi as they find it easier to grasp branding of the products.
- To understand the utility of a product, all the rural respondents voiced for multilingual translation of the key specifications of the products.
- It is an irony that many multinational companies still harbor a misconception that translation in India starts and ends with Hindi. They profess doubts about the purchasing power of the non-English, non-Hindi Indian buyer, but for the most part, these doubts are self-fulfilling prophecies (Hegde, 2016).
- Online archival data suggest that companies like Dabur, Patanjali, and that of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar are increasing their market share under key consumer categories due to multilingualism of their products.
- As for the quality of daily use products, Ayurvedic products, especially of Baba Ramdev, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, and Dabur have become a buzzword among urban as well as rural respondents.

CONCLUSIONS

Summarizing the findings, it goes without saying that English continues to be the most dominating language in the consumer market of India. The time is ripe for the Indian FMCG companies to move on with regional languages, so that the linguistic sanctity of the native languages could be preserved not only for the user-friendliness of the products but also socio-economic growth and socio-linguistic growth of the country. Furthermore, the paper forwards three remedial measures: (i) creates employment opportunity for translators, a trilingual policy (Global+National+Local) ought to be enforced for the branding of any consumer product; (ii) all the user guides and usage instruction of consumer products must be trilingual; (iii) as 75 % of India lives in villages, all the multinational and FMCG companies need to understand the rural and the suburban consumer better and cater consumer products accordingly.

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