

LANGUAGE USE IN PACKAGING: THE REACTION OF MALAY AND CHINESE CONSUMERS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This research sets out to determine the changes in attitude, emotion and behaviour of respondents to packaging using Bahasa Malaysia or Chinese in a multicultural Asian country, Malaysia. The findings of this research indicate that respondents reacted more favorably to product packaging imprinted in their own ethnic language. However, there is no significant difference between respondents in their attitude towards the company, indicating that there is a disparity between consumer reaction towards the company and its product packaging.

Key words: Language, packaging, ethnic, Malay, Chinese, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multiracial and multicultural country, with Malay, Chinese, Indian and numerous indigenous people living side by side. Communities in Malaysia speak various languages, including Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English (Khoo, 1991; David, 2003; Gannon, 2001). However, the Malay language is the national language and is taught as a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools (Maier, 1996; David, 2003). Chinese, Tamil and English languages are still widely used and most Malaysians are bi- or tri-lingual and can comfortably switch between more than one language in a sentence (Gannon, 2001; David, 1999a; 1999b). This language shift is the sociocultural process of individuals changing from the habitual use of one language to that of another, indicating familiarity with the various languages used (Weireich, 1970).

It is therefore not surprising that product packagings used in Malaysia can be found in various languages widely used by people belonging to different cultural and speech communities. Each community has a particular way of “seeing things” and is more influenced when its own language is used (Paul, 1993). Language also plays an important role in persuading people to buy products and services (Dyer, 1982), especially if the product is targeted at a specific group, such as an ethnic community.

Cultural differences and especially language differences have a significant impact on the way a product may be marketed, its brand name, and the advertising campaign chosen (Doole and Lowe, 1999). Numerous promotional efforts have gone wrong because of language-related mishaps, such as the case of Coca-Cola in China (Kotabe and Helsen, 1998; Hollensen, 1998; Doole and Lowe, 1999). Therefore, particular attention needs to be paid when using different languages in packaging.

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This paper explores the issue of attitude, emotion and behaviour of respondents by assessing the reactions of targeted and non-targeted groups to packaging using Bahasa Malaysia or Chinese in a multicultural Asian country such as Malaysia. The results have important implications for cross-cultural and international packagings that utilize different languages. The implications are also relevant for firms that choose a single- or multi-language strategy in their packaging.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Importance of Language in Marketing

Language is one of the most formidable barriers that international advertisers have to surmount and is often described as the most important element of culture (Hall and Hall, 1987). Firms that conduct business in multilingual societies need to decide what language to use for their product labels or advertising. The choice of a particular language may imply different patterns of thought and different customer motivation (Hollensen, 1998). A slogan or advertisement that is effective in one language may mean something different in another language, as was shown in the case of Coca-Cola advertisements in China (Hollensen, 1998; Doole and Lowe, 1999).

The selection of an appropriate language for product labels or packages is important in order to deliver an effective message to the consumers. Although English may be widely spoken (Gannon, 2001), and may even be the official language of the company, speaking and using a local language may make a dramatic difference (Kotabe and Helsen, 1998). Firms that translate promotional materials and information into the local language are often seen as being more serious in doing business in the country (Hollensen, 1998). The ideographic nature of Asian languages must also be taken into account in the creation of corporate and brand names, and in marketing communications created to promote the company and its products. The way an Asian perceives and evaluates writing differs significantly from the way a Westerner views writing (Schmitt et al., 1994). Hence, trade names, sales presentation materials, and advertisements used by firms in their home market have to be adapted and translated when used in foreign markets (Hollensen, 1998; Kotabe and Helsen, 1998). One relevant theory that links communication to reaction of audience is the Speech Accommodation Theory.

Speech Accommodation Theory

The Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT) shows how speakers can communicate in different languages, adjust or accommodate their linguistic style to their audience, and obtain a positive or negative reaction (Giles et al., 1973). Adaptation to another's use of language is called linguistic convergence. Linguistic convergence is the act of accommodating the audience by means of a wide range of linguistic features, including language rates, pauses, and pronunciation to obtain a favorable response. Figure 1 depicts an adaptation of SAT to the use of language in packaging, which posits that once the language

on packages accommodates respondents, they will tend to have a favorable attitude towards the company and its products.

On the other hand, the accentuation of differences is called linguistic divergence (Giles et al., 1987). Language divergence is a strategy for maintaining intergroup distinctiveness. People use language divergence to maintain their identity, ideological focus, cultural pride and distinctiveness. Figure 1 depicts an adaptation of SAT to the use of language in packaging, which posits that once the language on packages does not accommodate respondents, they will tend to have an unfavorable attitude towards the company and its products. These reactions may be based on the individual's sense of belonging to a specific group, and in the case of this study, to a specific ethnic community.

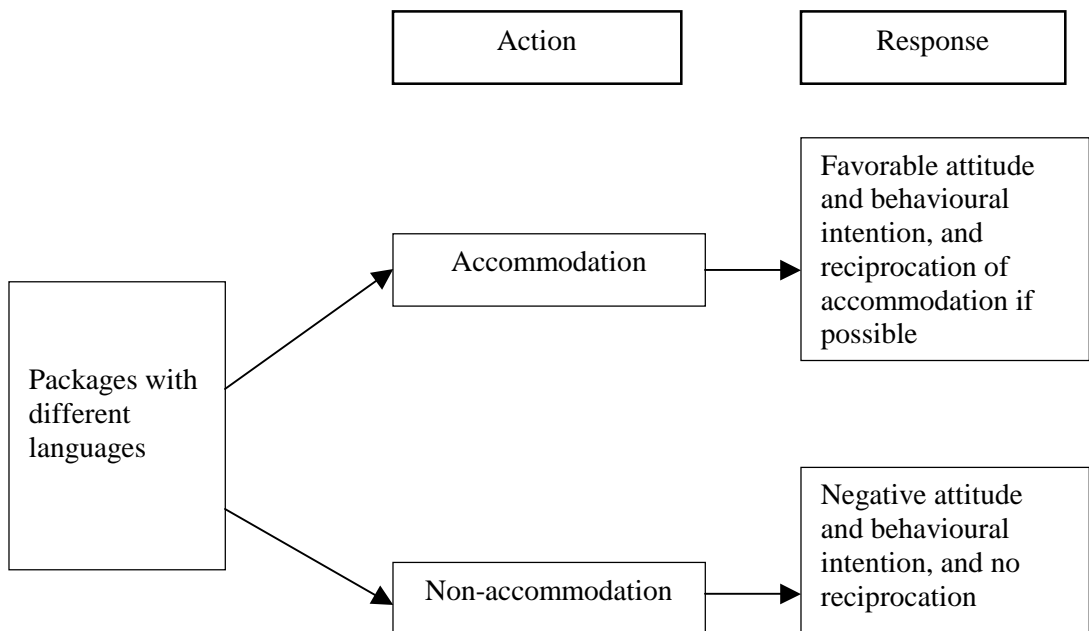


Figure 1. Adaptation of Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT) to the use of language in packaging

Ethnicity

Ethnicity is an objective description which refers to a group with common national or religious background (McGuire and McGuire, 1978), or a segment of a larger society with common origin and which shares a common culture (Yinger, 1985; Barth, 1969; Keyes, 1976; Vallee, 1982). Other researchers differentiate and compare ethnic origin with various biological features such as skin colour (De Vos, 1995) and language (De Vos, 1995; Schermerhorn, 1970; Vallee, 1982). In contrast, ethnic identity is more subjective (Cohen, 1978; Hirschman, 1981; Minor, 1992) and refers to a self-designation of a person's

commitment and strength of relationship to a particular group (Zaff et al., 2002; Chung and Fischer, 1999). In Malaysia, the three largest ethnic groups are the Malay, Chinese and Indian (Khoo, 1991), with each ethnic group having its own language for communication.

The Malay and Chinese Languages in Malaysia

There are more than a hundred languages spoken by the various communities in Malaysia (David, 2003). Language is the most direct, immediate, and culture-bound way of communication (Swift, 1991). In certain cases, it may also indicate socio-economic level, pattern of ideas, and customer motivation (Morais, 1998; Hollensen, 1998).

The Malay language is the national language of Malaysia, and was originally part of the Austronesian languages (Asmah, 1977; Asmah, 1983; Hassan, 1987). It is taught in primary and secondary levels of education in Malaysia. The Chinese language is widely spoken in East Asia, but the community in Malaysia is not homogenous. There are subgroups who speak different dialects such as Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka, and many others (Heng, 1996; David, 1999a; 1999b). These dialects are mutually unintelligible in their spoken forms, but they share a common system of writing. The Chinese language is based on ideographs unlike the Malay language which is based on alphabet. Hence, the way a Chinese writes is different from the way a Malay writes (Schmitt et al., 1994), and the different scripts are likely to affect perception, mental representation and memory.

Product Packaging

A product is anything that is offered to consumers for use or consumption that might satisfy their needs and wants (Kotler et al., 1991). It is generally packaged to reach the customer in a satisfactory condition, and the features of the packaging—such as the shape, color, graphic style and wordings—can influence a consumer's perception and emotion towards the product even before the customer sees it (Meyer and Lubliner, 1998). The packaging can directly influence the consumer's decision to make a purchase. Past studies on packaging have focused on the general role and characteristics of packaging designs (Cheskin, 1971; Schwartz, 1971), and on packaging as a means of communication or as a variable influencing product evaluation (McDaniel and Baker, 1977; Miaoulis and d'Amato, 1978). Other researchers have examined the influence of packaging on product quality perception, especially through integration of product packaging with extrinsic cues such as price and brand name (Bonner and Nelson, 1985; Stokes, 1985).

Bone and Corey (1992; 2000) studied the veracity and communicative competence of packaging, the impact of package size on consumer usage, and ethical packaging issues. Recently, packaging-related studies have measured the impact of package appearance such as color—novel as well as typical—on consumer attention and evaluation (Schoorsman et al., 1997). However, there have been fewer studies on how different languages on packaging influence the reaction of different ethnic groups.

It has been suggested that language does influence the effectiveness of cross-cultural advertising, especially the effectiveness of image-based advertising compared with information-based advertising (Laskey et al., 2000). Others reported that consumers react

more positively to advertisements that use their own language (Roslow and Nicholls, 1996; de Run, 2004). The present study proposes that language on packaging, which is also a form of advertising, also falls under the same purview and is in line with the Speech Accommodation Theory (Giles et al., 1973) explained earlier.

Based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses were constructed and proposed for testing:

- H₁: Ethnic group targeted by using their ethnic language will have a positive attitude towards the product.
- H₂: Ethnic group targeted by using their ethnic language will have a positive attitude towards the company.
- H₃: Ethnic group targeted by using their ethnic language will be more likely to purchase the product.
- H₄: Ethnic groups targeted by using their ethnic language will be more likely to recommend the product.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a 2×2 factorial design based on a population of Malay and Chinese respondents above 20 years old (Malays–6,611,5003 and Chinese–893,000 (Anonymous, 2003)). Respondents were selected through selective convenience sampling, a non-probability technique that attempts to obtain a sample of convenient elements of 150 Malay and 150 Chinese as suggested in previous research (de Run, 2004; Malhotra, 2004). Malay and Chinese respondents were chosen because they are, respectively, the largest and second largest ethnic groups in Malaysia (Khoo, 1991; Gannon, 2001; David, 1999; Schmitt, 1995). The third largest ethnic group (Indians) was not chosen because there has been a decrease in the use of its ethnic languages, especially Tamil (Lim, 1997). Furthermore, most Indians tend to shift to English in social interactions with their family and friends (David, 1996).

The context used in this research was a fictitious instant-noodle packaging. The authors designed two types of packaging with the same background, but different languages—one in Malay and the other in Chinese. Instant noodle was chosen because it is mainly a low-involvement product, it crosses ethnic and religious boundaries, and is affordable to everyone. The questionnaire was pre-tested before the collection of data to test its level of difficulty, the duration taken by respondents to answer all the questions, and whether respondents understood the questions. The pre-testing was carried out on a convenience sample of five people who were not included in the actual survey. The characteristics of the respondents for the pre-test were similar to those of the subjects who were to be included in the actual survey. The test respondents commented that the questions were easily understood, and the average completion time was five minutes.

Students of a local university distributed the questionnaires to their family, relatives and friends in various states in Malaysia. The questionnaires were written in English, Malay and Mandarin. Back translation was employed for the translation of the language in the questionnaire (Green and White, 1976). Questions used were derived from previous research on attitude towards a product (Maheswaran and Sternthal, 1990), attitude towards a company (Peterson et al., 1992), word of mouth (Becker and Kaldenberg, 2000), and

purchase intention (Maheswaran and Sternthal, 1990). A seven-point Likert scale was used to indicate the level of agreement, where 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree.”

FINDINGS

Only 277 sets of the questionnaire were collected due to lack of time, and missing or incomplete sets. The collected questionnaires consisted of 140 that were printed in Malay and 137 printed in Chinese. The total collected represents 92.3 % of the questionnaires distributed. A breakdown of the respondents is shown in Table 1, and the respondents’ profiles are given in Table 2. Reliability measurements (Alpha) were computed for attitude towards the product (0.8532), attitude towards the company (0.8446), behavioural intention (0.7179), and ethnic identification (0.7472).

Table 1. Questionnaires Collected

Respondents	Number collected
Malay view Malay Package	73
Chinese view Malay Package	67
Malay view Chinese Package	75
Chinese view Chinese Package	62
Total	277

This study employed a GLM-Univariate test to examine if there is a singular interaction between each dependent variable and the fixed factors (Townsend, 2002). The assumptions for normality and equality of variance were checked using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov (KS), Shapiro–Wilk (SW) and Levene’s tests, together with descriptive statistics and visual examination of the histogram and Q-Q plots.

The GLM-Univariate results for the variables attitude towards the product ($F = 9.460$ and $p = 0.000$), purchase intention ($F = 6.318$, $p = 0.000$) and word of mouth ($F = 6.240$, $p = 0.000$) were significant, while attitude towards the company ($F = 3.600$ and $p = 0.014$) was not significant. The mean scores for independent and dependent variables and the level of significance for the one-tailed t-test with Bonferroni Corrections are shown in Table 3. Table 4 details the findings in relation to the hypotheses specified earlier.

Table 2. Respondents' Profiles

Demographics		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Ethnicity	Malay	148	53.4
	Chinese	129	46.6
Gender	Male	154	55.6
	Female	123	44.4
Age	20–25	195	70.4
	26–30	35	12.6
	31–35	19	6.9
	36–40	14	5.1
	41–45	2	0.7
	46–50	9	3.2
	51–55	2	0.7
	56–60	1	0.4
State	Pulau Pinang	17	6.1
	Kedah	36	13.0
	Perlis	4	1.4
	Pahang	9	3.2
	Kelantan	7	2.5
	Kuala Lumpur	32	11.6
	Melaka	8	3.0
	Terengganu	7	2.5
	Negeri Sembilan	6	2.2
	Perak	8	2.9
	Johor	17	6.1
	Selangor	30	10.8
	Sarawak	74	26.7
	Sabah	22	8.0
Highest Education	Primary school	2	0.7
	Secondary school	48	17.3
	Pre-university	43	15.5
	Vocational school	12	4.3
	College (Certificate)	14	5.1
	College (Diploma)	37	13.4
	First degree	109	39.3
	Master's degree	10	3.6
Doctoral degree	2	0.7	

Table 3. Mean and Bonferroni Test

Factor	Ethnicity	Language on Product Package (mean scores)		Level of Significance (1-tailed)	Bonferroni (5%)*
		Malay	Chinese		
Attitude towards the product	Malay	3.85	3.31	0.01	S
	Chinese	3.60	4.38	0.00	S
Attitude towards the company	Malay	4.04	3.57	0.02	NS
	Chinese	3.79	4.24	0.05	NS
Purchase intention	Malay	3.97	3.12	0.00	S
	Chinese	3.54	4.39	0.01	S
Word of mouth	Malay	4.12	3.39	0.01	S
	Chinese	3.58	4.50	0.00	S

*S: significant, NS: not significant.

Table 4. Findings for Hypotheses

Ethnic Group	Variable	Product Package Accommodated To:			
		Malay		Chinese	
		H*	F*	H*	F*
Malay	Attitude towards the product	(+)	(+)	(-)	(-)
	Attitude towards the company	(+)	(NS)	(-)	(NS)
	Purchase intention	(+)	(+)	(-)	(-)
	Word of mouth	(+)	(+)	(-)	(-)
Chinese	Attitude towards the product	(-)	(-)	(+)	(+)
	Attitude towards the company	(-)	(NS)	(+)	(NS)
	Purchase intention	(-)	(-)	(+)	(+)
	Word of mouth	(-)	(-)	(+)	(+)

*H: hyporesearch, F: findings, (negative, positive, NS: not significant).

DISCUSSION

Contextual Influences

Malaysia as a multi-racial country has a social environment where various languages are used in daily communication. Bahasa Malaysia, or the Malay language, has been legislated as the national and official language, as the government believes that the key to unity for a

polyglot group of people is to establish a language of mutual understanding (Asmah, 1977; Asmah, 1983). However, communication between Malaysians does not consist of the simple, straightforward use of a standard language (David, 1999b). It tends to be code switching, a feature which has become common in spoken communication in Malaysian society (Kuang, 2002). Therefore, it is not surprising to see product packagings in Malaysia imprinted with various languages such as “Maggie Mee” (combination of Malay, Chinese and English), “Helang” (separate use of Chinese and Malay), “Axion,” “Glo” (combination of Chinese and Malay), “Reunion Rice” (combination of English and Chinese), “Shin Ramyun” (Chinese and English) and “Sarimi” (Malay only).

However, consumers have been found to react more favorably to advertisements that use their own ethnic language (Roslow and Nicholls, 1996; de Run, 2004). Similar results were found in this study among Malaysian consumers (Table 3) where the Malay and Chinese respondents reacted significantly to different languages used in packagings. They reacted positively towards product packagings imprinted with their own language, and negatively towards packagings imprinted in the other ethnic group’s language.

The acceptance of a product packaging in the Malay language by Malay respondents may be due to its being the dominant-group language as well as the national language (Asmah, 1977; Asmah, 1983). Another probable reason for acceptance may be that Malay is an indigenous language that is important for administration and diplomacy in the Malay archipelago (Asmah, 1982). In addition, although Mandarin is used as the medium of instruction in vernacular primary schools, Malay is taught as a compulsory subject (David, 2003). Hence, the Malay language is comprehensible to most Malaysians, but not everyone may understand the Chinese language. Therefore, this may influence the reaction of Malay respondents.

For Chinese respondents, their reaction to the use of different languages on packagings was also significantly different (Table 3). Chinese respondents reacted more positively towards products packaged in their own language, compared with those in the Malay language. Similar results were also reported by Roslow and Nicholls (1996). However, the present findings contradict a recent report that Chinese respondents have negative emotions when they view advertisements in their own language (de Run, 2004).

Theoretical Discussion

The findings of this research provide support for the hypothesized positive attitude towards the product and behaviour intention by those who have been targeted. However, the findings do not support the postulated positive attitude towards the company. Therefore, a mental distinction exists between the product and the company. In other words, respondents may not care about the company producing the product, but the features of the product are enough to convince them to purchase.

The findings relate well to the Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT). The SAT framework shows that the audience may have a favorable attitude and a positive behavioural intention if they are accommodated to the language used by the speaker (Giles et al., 1973). However, as there is no significant difference shown by respondents for attitude towards the company, the present results only provide partial support for the SAT. The findings also lend support to the theory of Attitude-Towards-the-Object (Fishbein, 1963). This theory

assumes that when consumers hold positive feelings towards most or even some features of a product, these feelings will translate into a purchase. In this study, the feature of the product that promotes positive feelings is the language used in packaging, which is more important than the company's background in promoting a purchase.

Managerial Implication

The present finding that product features are more important than the company's background should be noted by the management of Chinese and Malay companies in a multicultural country such as Malaysia if they are keen to target purchasers belonging to another ethnic group. The management of these companies should emphasize product quality and utilize the target group's language in order to elicit positive behavioural actions.

The findings also suggest that once a product is targeted, a single language can be used in the packaging. However, a product that is targeted at two or more ethnic groups using only one ethnic group's language will not be effective. Therefore, marketing executives should consider the ethnic composition of their market before deciding on the language used on packaging. On the other hand, although employing the consumer's first language may be effective for the targeted and bilingual consumers, marketing executives may find it difficult to build a global brand should they want to expand their market. Furthermore, by employing different languages for different customers, this may cause confusion and negative reactions from other ethnic groups (de Run, 2004). The present study suggests that marketing executives in a multiethnic environment should take into consideration global branding and the attitude and behavioural intention of various ethnic groups when deciding on the language used for packaging.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that respondents react more favorably to product packagings imprinted in their own ethnic language. There is significant difference between the two ethnic groups tested, especially for the variables attitude towards the product and behaviour intention. However, there is no significant difference between the respondents for the variable attitude towards the company.

Limitations of the Research

A limiting factor in this research is that the respondents were restricted to Malay and Chinese consumers in Malaysia. Further, it did not take into account the impact of those who have intermarried, have different education, or who have been acculturated. These groups include people such as the "Baba Nyonya"—who are Chinese, but whose lifestyle is more integrated with the Malays—and those who have become Malay by law because of their change in religion. Furthermore, most of the respondents were between the ages of 20 and 25 (69.7%), resulting in a sample skewed towards younger respondents. In addition, the questionnaires were distributed through convenience sampling.

Future Research

Future research can focus on other ethnic groups such as Indian or other minorities in Malaysia to determine their reaction towards different languages used in product packaging. Future research may also focus on the combination of languages on a product package. It will be more interesting if other languages such as English and Tamil, or combinations of various other languages, are used.

It may also be interesting to look at various types of products and packaging methods and the degree that language affects the variables studied here. A detailed study could look into existing products and measure current and post-research reactions. “Halal” products are also very popular in Malaysia and there is limited study on the impact of “halal” labeling on various religious groups. Further studies could look into this matter and its impact on packaging decisions.

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