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Business English as a Lingua Franca in advertising texts in the Gulf: Analyzing the attitudes of the Emirati community

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### **Abstract**

Scholars have become increasingly interested in how organizations communicate with their external stakeholders, such as consumers. Recent studies have looked specifically at the response of consumers in a number of different European countries to the use of English in advertising texts, as part of a commonly used marketing strategy to standardize advertising campaigns, which builds on the assumption that English is not only neutral, but also widely understood. In this article, we discuss a survey of Emirati consumer attitudes to the use of English in advertising texts in the UAE, on the basis of just over three hundred responses. We used a between subjects design and presented half of our respondents with an advertisement in English for a well known manufacturer of mobile phones and compared their responses to a similar number of respondents who were presented with an equivalent advertisement in Arabic. Respondents were asked a series of questions focusing on attitude towards the ad, attitude towards the product, comprehension of the corporate slogan in English, and their own knowledge and use of English. The findings indicate that the English ad was perceived as neutral and that attitudes towards the product and advertisement were not impacted by the language used. However, although most respondents reported high competence levels in English and a full understanding of the corporate slogan used, many of them expressed a

preference for advertising in Arabic. Open-ended responses also suggested an underlying concern to preserve the Arabic language and cultural identity. The findings are discussed in terms of the unique social and cultural fabric of the modern-day UAE, as well as the Emirati community as an economically powerful Muslim population.

## **Introduction**

Scholars have become increasingly interested in how organizations communicate with external constituencies, particularly with important groups of stakeholders, such as investors and consumers. Cornelissen (2008), for instance, provides an account of corporate communication strategies in general, de Mooij (2010) focuses specifically on the impact of consumer behaviour and culture on advertising, Livesey (Livesey, 2001; 2002; Livesey, Stafford, Hartman and Shearer, 2009) looks at how corporations such as McDonalds and Shell have adapted their corporate communication to move towards an increase in dialogue with their stakeholders in the light of a number of corporate scandals in the past ten years, and Crawford Camiciottoli (2009, 2010) shows how the communication that executive management uses to interact with the investment community is uniquely shaped by the ICT-mediated setting in which it takes place. In addition to studies such as these that have been primarily concerned with the *analysis* of corporate discourse, a number of scholars have also turned their attention to the impact that organizational communication has on stakeholders; they have therefore focused on the *response* of various types of interactants to specific aspects of the discourse used in such communication. This investigation into how people respond to a text, which is generally referred to as the field of document design, has often involved the survey of a particular set of respondents who are asked to respond to a set of manipulated texts designed to target a particular characteristic or set of characteristics in those texts to establish their effects. For example, Renkema (2009) investigates how readers

evaluate the usability of two governmental texts (a tax form and a passport renewal letter) once they had been revised, De Groot, Gerritsen, Korzilius, and Nickerson (2011) take a genre approach and explore the response of financial analysts to the text realizations used in annual general reports, and Hornikx, Van Meurs and De Boer (2010) investigate the effects of using English slogans in advertising in a non-English speaking context, i.e. in the Netherlands. This last study focuses on the second important strand of research into organizational communication that informs the present study, viz. the key role that Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) now plays in international business as “a ‘neutral’ and shared communication code” (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005: 404) that co-exists in numerous contexts alongside local languages (Nickerson, 2005; Planken, 2005; Charles, 2007; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010). The present study will therefore focus on the use of BELF in advertising texts and will investigate the impact that its use has on an important group of stakeholders: consumers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It will draw on research into document design, and it will use an experimental approach combining a set of texts together with a respondent survey as the basis for the methodology. In addition, we will also contextualise the study within recent work on the use of BELF in external corporate communication in general, but with particular reference to recent studies of the use of BELF in the advertising texts used in non-English speaking countries. Finally, although document design has often referred to manipulated versions of the same (authentic) text in order to isolate the target text characteristics in an experimental setting, in our case we will use equivalent, authentic, versions of the same advertising text in Arabic and English, and in doing so we will increase the validity of our investigation.

The study of BELF in advertising texts is important because of the economic advantages associated with being able to standardise a campaign for a global audience. If international consumers are able to understand advertising texts in English, and they also hold

positive or neutral attitudes towards its use, then this is an indication for corporations and advertising agencies that standardisation is a viable, and cost-effective, option. Our study seeks to contribute to this discussion, with particular reference to an economically powerful group of consumers in the Arab-speaking world. The account of our research begins with a discussion on the rise of BELF in global business communication with particular reference to what this has meant for advertising and the way that corporations communicate with consumers. It continues with an overview of the cultural and economic landscape of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the use of English and other languages in advertising in the UAE that targets both the local Emirati community as well as the numerous, and diverse, number of expatriates currently living and working in the country. We then explain how we formulated the set of four research questions that underpin the study, we follow this with a description of the methodology we used and our findings, and we conclude with a discussion of what those findings might mean for corporations using advertising texts to reach their Emirati consumers.

### **The rise of BELF in global business communication**

Pioneering work on BELF by Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) and by Charles (2007) has established the rise in the use of BELF in global business communication. Numerous studies have looked at the use of BELF in various forms of business discourse (e.g. Gerritsen et al., 2007; Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010; Salvi and Tanaka, 2011) and have shown that English is no longer associated with any particular national culture, but is instead now considered as a neutral means of communication that frequently co-exists alongside other local languages, often within the same text or spoken event. In addition, several very recent studies have looked specifically at the response of consumers in a number of different European countries to the use of BELF in various types of promotional texts, including recruitment documentation, annual general reports and advertising texts targeted at

consumers who do not speak English as their first language (e.g. Gerritsen, Nickerson, Van Hooft, Van Meurs, & Korzilius, 2010; Planken, van Meurs & Radlinska, 2010; Hornikx et al., 2010; De Groot, Gerritsen, Korzilius, & Nickerson, 2011). The use of BELF in texts such as these is part of a commonly used marketing strategy to standardize promotional campaigns which builds on the assumption that English is not only neutral, but also widely understood. Gerritsen, Nickerson, Van Hooft, Van Meurs, and Korzilius (2010) and Planken et al., (2010), for instance, both provide extensive discussion of the reasons why business organizations decide to promote their products using standardized advertising in English, suggesting that this is motivated not only by the economic advantages that can be gained by opting for a suitable lingua franca, but also by the possibility that consumers will associate English – and therefore the product being advertised – with positive attributes such as modernity, quality, innovation and glamour. As Planken et al. (2010) point out, a number of scholars have subscribed to this view (e.g. Martin, 2002; Piller, 2003; Bhatia & Ritchie, 2004; Kelly-Holmes, 2005), although recent empirical studies would suggest that consumers generally do not view advertising texts in English more positively than they do the same texts in their own language. Both Gerritsen et al. (2010) and Planken et al. (2010) for instance, in their investigations of the use of English in European advertising, found little evidence that consumers were consistent in associating English with positive attributes, which would then potentially affect their decision to buy the product.

In the present study we focus on attitudes towards English language advertising in the UAE, representing a rapidly developing Middle Eastern economy with a unique social and cultural profile. Our aim is therefore to replicate the type of research that has investigated the effects of using English to advertise to European consumers who speak a language other than English as their first language, in order to contribute to the on-going discussion on standardisation in global advertising. To our knowledge, this is the first time that the response

of Arabic speaking consumers has been investigated in relation to the use of English in advertising texts. In addition, although the GDPs of countries such as Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the Gulf Region, are now among the highest in the world ([World Economic Outlook Database-September 2011](#)), with a corresponding increase in spending power each year, very little is known about the attitudes of Middle Eastern consumers to the use of BELF in advertising texts.

Many studies have highlighted BELF communication in Asian contexts, including Singapore (Goby, 1999), Malaysia (Goh Seng Pang & Swee Heng, 1996; Nair-Venugopal, 2009), Japan (Cowling, 2007), and particularly Hong Kong (Li So-mui & Mead, 2000; Bhatia & Candlin, 2001; Chew, 2005; Evans, 2010). Several of these underline the increasing use of English as the language of Asian business. The very few studies have looked at English usage in the Middle East, for instance Schaub (2000) for Egypt, Al-Haq & Al-Masaeid (2009) for Jordan, and Sinno (2008) for Lebanon, indicate that English is generally viewed in a positive way and as the language of technology, of progress and of the future. In the UAE, anecdotal evidence would suggest that the situation is similar within the local Emirati population. The Gulf News (2011) for instance, reports on a talk given by Patricia Abu Wardeh that details the shift in the use of English within one generation, from the largely (monolingual) Arabic speaking population in the nineteen fifties, to the current situation where English is used by some Emiratis, not only as a second language and a lingua franca in social domains such as business and education, but also in the home. This is supported by Randall and Samimi (2010), who conducted a needs analysis at the Dubai Police Academy which points towards a transition to English as a lingua franca and the corresponding replacement of Arabic with English.

In the next section we will discuss the demographics of the UAE, the use of English in advertising, and the growing importance of Muslim consumers within the world economy.

### **The United Arab Emirates: multicultural, but bilingual?**

The spectacular financial development of the UAE in recent years has created an extremely dynamic environment which presents both interesting opportunities and unique challenges for the type of research we undertake in this study (cf. Charise, 2007). Current estimates suggest that there are now around 220 different cultural groups working in the UAE, which includes large numbers of people from the Indian subcontinent, the Philippines and Indonesia, but also from the United States, Western Europe, and Australia. However, out of a population of around 8 million, fewer than 20% are local Emiratis, who also make up only 9% of the workforce, mostly working in the public sector (Toledo, 2006; National Bureau of Statistics, 2010; The National, 2010). This means that the expatriate community is very large, and therefore as we have discussed above, English is widely spoken as a lingua franca, alongside Arabic, and in some specific contexts such as the construction industry, Urdu. Advertising exists in various forms, including Arabic only texts, English only texts, texts which combine both English and Arabic, and texts which consist of both English and Anglicized forms of Arabic vocabulary and script. Interestingly, in one common form of advertising, where bilingual Arabic and English texts are promoted side by side, such parallel advertisements are even used when the target audience is presumably only local. For example, recruitment ads for employment in the public administration and government sectors are clearly designed to attract young Emirati university graduates with images of desirable candidates in traditional national dress.

The local Emirati population therefore deals with advertising in both languages, sometimes in monolingual texts, sometimes in bilingual texts, and sometimes in texts incorporating both languages in different parts of the text. As we discuss further below, the present study refers to two equivalent texts, one in English only, and the other in Arabic with an English corporate slogan. These are highly representative of the sorts of texts that are used



in UAE advertising. In addition, although the local community is small compared to the expatriate community, the Emiratis clearly have both economic and social dominance within the UAE. The Emirati community also represents a group of Muslim consumers, which is widely seen as a yet untapped global market consisting of as many as 1.8 billion consumers worldwide (Ogilvy Noor, 2012). In the study we focus on attitudes towards English language advertising in the UAE, representing a rapidly developing Middle Eastern economy with a multicultural demography, and an economically powerful Muslim population. More specifically, we address the following research questions:

1. Does the language used in the text influence consumer attitudes to the advertisement?
2. Does the language used in the text influence consumer attitudes to the product?
3. Does the language used in the text influence consumer intention to buy?

In order to investigate these questions, we conducted a quantitative study based on a survey distributed among members of the Emirati community in which they were asked to respond to either the entirely English version of the advertising text, or the Arabic version with an English slogan. Each respondent saw only one version of the text. The decision to use this method rather than qualitative approaches (e.g., focus groups, observation, shadowing etc.), not only reflected the document design approach taken by the studies of BELF in advertising that we have discussed above, it was also driven by issues of access to the local community, as will be further explained in the Methodology section below. In the survey, respondents were asked a series of questions focusing on their attitude towards the ad in question, their attitude towards the product advertised, and their intention to buy the product. A fourth research question focused on the respondents' ability to comprehend a fragment in an advertising text, in this case a familiar corporate slogan, which is similar to the types of

advertising texts that are commonly used in the UAE where Arabic and English are combined. The fourth RQ was therefore as follows:

4. Are consumers able to comprehend the English used in advertising texts?

In relation to RQ 4, the respondents were asked to self-report if they were able to understand the slogan, as well as being asked to describe in their own words what it meant. They were also asked about their attitudes in general to the use of English and Arabic in advertising in the UAE. These RQs and the questionnaire items designed to operationalize them are described in more detail in the next section.

### **Methodology**

The survey of Emirati consumer attitudes towards the use of BELF in advertising texts was undertaken within the framework of a student research project for an organizational communication course at Zayed University, a leading government-sponsored English-medium institute of higher education in the UAE, with campuses in both Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The 4<sup>th</sup>-year course is mandatory for all College of Business majors and aims to provide students with high-level communication skills necessary for success in the dynamic and multicultural UAE business environment. A total of 78 senior students were involved with the project, both in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, under the close supervision of the authors of the present study who were both faculty members at the time. As a highly collectivist, high context society, where the relationship is all important (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1996), their involvement provided access to members of the Emirati community which would otherwise have been difficult, particularly to those members of the community that had little (or no) knowledge of English, as well as to those members of the older generation of Emiratis (e.g. the grandparents of the students involved), some of whom are illiterate. The student-researchers also worked with faculty to create a bilingual Arabic-English version of the questionnaire, using the translation-back-translation method advocated by Brislin (1980). In

addition, as specialist informants, they participated in a pre-test of the questionnaire in order to fine-tune the data collection instrument.

### **Instrument**

The questionnaire was designed to gauge attitudes towards the advertisement of a product with textual information provided in English vs. Arabic, together with an investigation of whether or not the target audience could comprehend an important English fragment in the text, viz. the corporate slogan. The product in question is a mobile telephone marketed by a globally-recognized multinational in the telecommunications sector (Nokia), specifically a recent touch screen smartphone model (the N8). This type of product was selected due to its high level of familiarity and relevance to Emirati consumers, who would thus be more likely to have developed corresponding attitudes and opinions.<sup>1</sup> The product advertisement was procured using an internet search from a UK-based advertising agency ([www.jknowles.co.uk/nokia-n8-social/advertising/portfolio/](http://www.jknowles.co.uk/nokia-n8-social/advertising/portfolio/)) in its English version. This was then followed by an additional internet search to locate the Arabic version developed by the same advertising agency for the same advertising campaign.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent discussion with the advertising agency in the UK revealed that the English version of the advertisement had been produced as the master version, and that the ad had then been translated and used around most of the world in numerous different languages. The two advertisements are essentially equivalent in terms of design, colours, imagery, layout and presence of social media links, as a result of the fact that industry practice is to upload the master version onto a server in a form where it can then be downloaded and translated for local markets. The corporate slogan (Connecting People) appears in English in both versions, without providing an Arabic

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<sup>1</sup> According to Kalba (2008), in 2007 the UAE ranked highest in the world for mobile penetration rate, with 100+ phones per 100 persons.

<sup>2</sup> This version is available from the authors.

translation in the Arabic language advertisement, as is often the case in the UAE, and the most prominent sales information (presented in a larger font size in both versions than the font size used for the corporate slogan), “All your friends in one place” is the equivalent in both languages. This was verified by a native speaker of Arabic before the survey was circulated. It was important to confirm this equivalence since the Arabic and English versions of advertising texts are sometimes modified for cultural reasons. For example, a hotel chain in Dubai is unlikely to stress nightlife opportunities in an Arabic version advertisement, whereas this would be a common occurrence in an English version advertisement (see also Ogilvy Noor, 2012; Alserhan, 2010, for further discussion on Islamic branding). The N8 smartphone advertisement therefore provided an appropriate way of looking at the response to the same text in Arabic and English because the appeal used in the advertisement, i.e. easy communication with friends, is appropriate in both the Islamic and Western world. It also meant that the questionnaire survey could be distributed on the basis of equivalent authentic texts that had actually been used in advertising, rather than on the basis of a combination of authentic and manipulated versions of a text, as has been the case in many previous studies (e.g. Planken et al., 2010, Gerritsen et al., 2010; Nickerson, Gerritsen, & Van Meurs, 2005). The Arabic version contains somewhat less informative small print text than the English version. However, this was not considered to be a problem as the respondents in the survey were asked to look at only one version of the text (either Arabic or English), thus avoiding any possible carry over effects.

Two questionnaire items were designed to reveal attitudes towards the product advertised (item 1) and the advertisement itself (item 2). A five-point Likert-like scale measured attitudes towards the product in terms of attractiveness (attractive/unattractive), technological sophistication (basic/advanced), cost (expensive/inexpensive), capacity to stimulate interest (fun/boring) and stylishness (stylish/unstylish), and attitudes towards the

advertisement itself in terms of attractiveness, capacity to stimulate interest, and stylishness, as well as modernity (modern/old-fashioned) and effectiveness (effective/ineffective). In this way, attitudes could be scored and thus operationally defined. To lower the risk of automatic response patterns, items were presented to vary the positive-negative cline of the options (Gambrell, Martin Palmer, Codling & Anders Mazzoni, 1996). Two items concerning interest in buying the product (item 3) and perception of English language competence (item 4) were formulated using a forced-choice closed option yes/no response. Item 5 addressed the respondents' understanding of the meaning of the corporate slogan in the form of a self-report (yes or no), and included additional space to describe the meaning or give an alternative translation in case of an affirmative response, to check their comprehension. Item 6 asked respondents to express their preferences for the language used in advertising by choosing among three options (Arabic vs. English vs. No preference), with additional space to explain their choices in more detail. The final item (7) asked respondents to provide demographic information about their gender, age, educational level and employment status, which could be useful to shed more light on the results of the analysis of the survey.

The text of the questionnaire was produced in both English and Arabic so that respondents would have the option to select the language with which they felt most comfortable. Allowing respondents to have this choice facilitates an adequate understanding of the questionnaire items and, consequently, ensures more accurate and valid responses.

### **Procedure**

Following Planken et al. (2010), our survey was conducted according to a between-subject design, where some respondents were presented with the English language advertisement and others with the Arabic language advertisement. In other words, as we observed above, they only saw one version of the advertisement. The questionnaires were distributed in hard copy form to a total of 640 respondents among members of the Emirati community. These

comprised the families and friends of the student-researchers involved with the project. As we have discussed, as a collectivist society (National culture Arab Emirates) it seemed most likely that members of the same in-group would be willing to complete the questionnaire. The student-researchers were asked to make sure that all of their respondents had given their consent before completing the questionnaire and had done so voluntarily. In addition, they were also requested to talk through the questionnaire with any family member who asked them to do so and, if necessary, to then record their answers accordingly. This was because it was possible that some older members of the community could either be illiterate or not entirely comfortable with writing either Arabic or English.

Out of the 640 questionnaires distributed, a total of 302 were completed and returned, giving us a response rate of 47.2%. Of these, 147 respondents (48.7%) had been given questionnaires containing the English language version of ad, while 155 respondents (51.3%) had been given questionnaires with the Arabic language version of the ad. As anticipated above, the questionnaire itself was produced in a bilingual form so that participants could choose to respond in the language that they preferred. Table 1 shows the distribution of the English vs. Arabic language questionnaires across the two versions of the advertisement. As can be seen from the table, one third of the respondents chose to complete the English version of the questionnaire (53 for the Arabic ad and 49 for the English ad respectively), and two thirds chose the Arabic version (102 for the Arabic ad and 98 for the English ad). In other words, although there was an obvious preference for the Arabic questionnaire, one third of the respondents still chose to respond in English. This distribution would seem to support the continuing (and unsurprising) dominance of Arabic for the majority of the respondents in our survey, but also, at least for some of the respondents, a neutral or positive attitude towards the use of English. We will discuss this below in more detail together with our findings.

[Insert Table 1 here]

## Statistical analysis

The data collected from the questionnaires were elaborated with the statistical software package SPSS version 19. For questionnaire items 1 and 2 which each contained multiple scales, Cronbach's alpha was calculated to ensure internal reliability. All scales showed good reliability with values of  $> .7$ . In particular, for item 1 relating to attitude towards the product, Cronbach's alpha was .720 for the English ad and .813 for the Arabic ad. For item 2 relating to attitude towards the ad, Cronbach's alpha was .812 for the English ad and .846 for the Arabic ad.

Two-tailed t-tests were performed on the data from questionnaires that referred to the English ad and from those that referred to Arabic ad as independent samples to determine whether there were any significant differences between them at a 95% confidence level ( $p < .05$ ).<sup>3</sup> This was carried out for items 1 (attitude towards the product), 2 (attitude towards the ad) and 3 (intention to buy the product). For items 4 (self-reported understanding of the English corporate slogan), 5 (self-reported ability to hold a conversation in English), and 6 (preferred language in advertising), frequencies were calculated and in some instances cross-tabulated with demographic data contained in the last survey item.

## Results

With reference to attitude towards the product (item 1), the t-test showed that there were no significant differences between the mean scores of respondents presented with the English vs. Arabic version of the ad for the four scales that measured perceptions of attractiveness, cost, capacity to stimulate interest and stylishness. However, the scale that measured the

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<sup>3</sup> For items 1 and 2, data from scales that had been counterbalanced to avoid automatic response patterns were re-coded during elaboration in order to standardize mean scores, whereby a score of 1 always encoded the least positive attitude, while a score of 5 encoded the most positive attitude.

perception of the product as more or less advanced showed a significant difference ( $p = .010$ ). More specifically, respondents who were presented with the Arabic ad perceived the product as significantly more advanced than their counterparts who saw the English ad. In contrast, the t-test run on item 2 that measured attitudes toward the ad itself revealed no significant differences between the mean scores of any of the five attitude attributes across the two versions. In other words, the language of the ad did not have any impact on whether the respondents perceived the ad as more or less attractive, modern, expensive, fun or stylish. Similarly, there was no significant difference between the two versions of the ad in terms of whether respondents were interested in buying the product or not (item 3).

Frequency calculations based on the complete population of respondents (i.e., English and Arabic ad respondents combined) for item 4 showed that a large majority reported being able to understand the corporate slogan “Connecting people”, with 81.7% responding ‘yes’ and 18.3% responding ‘no’.<sup>4</sup> Respondents who indicated ‘yes’ were then prompted to explain the meaning of the slogan or give a translation. These explanations were checked and then categorized by a bilingual Arabic and English speaker. They are shown in Table 2, along with their relative percentages. With only one exception, all the respondents who answered ‘yes’ to item 4, were indeed able to explain the meaning of the slogan or to translate the phrase adequately into Arabic.

[Insert Table 2 here]

For item 5 concerning self-reported ability to hold a conversation in English, 90.4% of the respondents who completed this question responded ‘yes’ and 9.6% responded ‘no’. These percentages were then cross-tabulated with the three age groupings from the demographic data. Interestingly, most of the ‘no’ responses were in the 20-30 age group (N=16), followed by the 31-45 age group (N=11), and the 46+ age group (N=2).

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<sup>4</sup> All percentages are reported as valid percent to exclude missing responses.



The calculation of frequencies for item 6 for the complete population revealed that 40.8% preferred advertising in Arabic, 15.7% preferred advertising in English, while 43.5% had no preference. The reasons that participants cited for their preferences are illustrated in Table 3, according to preference for Arabic advertising, preference for English advertising or no preference and are reported in raw frequency counts. In addition, the frequencies of advertising language preferences were cross-tabulated with demographic data for both the entire population (Table 4) and separately for the two language versions of the ad, with Table 5 reporting results for respondents who viewed the English ad and Table 6 reporting those for the Arabic ad. These results are reported in raw frequency counts (N).

[Insert Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6 here]

To sum up, the findings indicate that there was no difference in the attitudes to the different language versions of the ad. In addition, the attitudes to the product were only different for one of the variables, i.e. whether the product was viewed as advanced or not, in which case the product in the Arabic version of the ad was viewed as more advanced than the product in the English version of the ad. Moreover, most respondents reported high competence levels in English and almost all demonstrated a full understanding of the corporate slogan. With reference to language preference, there were more respondents who either had no preference for the language used in advertising or who preferred Arabic, than there were who preferred English. This was true across gender, age, educational level and employment status, and regardless of whether respondents were presented with the English or Arabic ad. Finally, open-ended responses also suggested an underlying concern to preserve the Arabic language and cultural identity.

## **Discussion**

For the first three research questions (attitude towards the ad, attitude towards the product, and willingness to buy the product), there were no significant differences between the two

different language versions of the ad, with the exception of extent to which the respondents viewed the product as either basic or advanced. As in previous studies that have looked at attitudes towards the use of English in advertising in both Western and Eastern Europe (e.g. Authors, 2010a; Planken et al., 2010), this suggests that the impact of using English in advertising intended for the Emirati community is generally neutral, although as we will go on to discuss below, this may be different than the views actually expressed when people are asked to state their preference. It was interesting to note that the respondents who viewed the Arabic version of the ad, rated the product as more advanced than the respondents who viewed the English version of the ad; there was a mean score of 3.61 for the Arabic version of the ad compared to a mean score of 3.26 for the English version of the ad. As discussed above, numerous studies have noted that advertising agencies justify the use of English and therefore the dissemination of standardized campaigns, because of the perceived association of English with modern products (e.g. Planken et al., 2010; Bhatia & Ritchie, 2004; Kelly-Holmes, 2005; Gerritsen, Korzilius, Van Meurs, & Gijssbers, 2000), but several have gone on to show that consumers may view such advertising in quite a different way (Gerritsen et al., 2007; Gerritsen et al., 2010; Planken et al., 2010). Our study would also suggest that consumers did not associate the use of English with modern products, at least for the local Emirati population that we surveyed, implying that although the use of English may be considered as neutral in advertising, it may not have as positive an impact on the consumer as the agencies would like to believe.

For the fourth research question, almost all of the respondents were able to translate the phrase “Connecting People” into Arabic, or to give an acceptable meaning for the phrase (item 4). This also suggested that the Emirati nationals that we surveyed had achieved a relatively high level of English language proficiency, supported by the evidence from the respondents themselves in their self-reported ability both to understand the slogan and to hold

a conversation in English (item 5). Hornikx et al. (2010) have argued that international English slogans can influence consumer attitudes positively, as long as the language used is relatively simple.

Although it would seem plausible that the majority of the advertising campaigns that use English to promote their message in the UAE are indeed understood by an Emirati audience, our findings also indicated that these may not be positively received by all the consumers concerned; more than a third of the respondents (40.8 %) expressed a preference for advertising in Arabic, in contrast to only 15.7% who expressed a preference for advertising in English (item 6). Those who expressed a preference for Arabic, did so for the obvious reasons that Arabic was their first language and Arabic was easier for them to understand. However, at the same time, there was evidence of an awareness of a potential threat to the local language and culture. These two views are illustrated in the following comments written in the space provided to explain reasons for preferences: (1) “Because it’s more easy to get the idea without misunderstanding” and (2) “Advertisements should be in Arabic too to keep the mother language and national identity”. This preference for Arabic over English as the language of advertising may also be reflected to a certain extent in the higher percentage of respondents who chose to complete the questionnaire in Arabic rather than English (see Table 1), corresponding to a roughly two-thirds majority, regardless of which version of the ad they viewed.

The smaller percentage of respondents who instead expressed a preference for English as the language of advertising (15.7%) similarly stated that it was easier for them to understand, but also because they viewed English as a language that would reach a wider section of the population. This could indicate not only a shift towards English from Arabic in some Emirati families, but also an appreciation of the multicultural and multilingual society that exists within the UAE. The fact that around 30% of our respondents chose to respond to

the English version of the questionnaire (see Table 1) would also support this, particularly since the Arabic text was printed first and the English text as second on the back. These attitudes emerged from comments such as “I basically think in English these days” and “English is the language of the world”. This possible shift in attitudes could be investigated in future research. Finally, one further point of relevance to the creation of advertising campaigns in the UAE is the fact that where respondents expressed no preference for either Arabic or English in advertising (43.5%), although 52% of them said that it was simply because they were able to understand both languages, just over 16% said that they had made their choice because of the standard of the Arabic translations. In other words, respondents were selecting English rather than Arabic because of the poor quality of the Arabic translations.

### **Concluding remarks**

Our study has shown that there may certainly be commercial drivers that point towards the successful use of standardized advertising campaigns in the UAE in that the use of BELF in advertising may not only be understood by the majority of the Emirati community, but also be viewed as neutral at least by some. In contrast, however, our study also revealed social drivers that suggest that there is an underlying concern with the preservation of Arabic language and culture within the local community, since a large number of our respondents expressed a preference for advertising in Arabic, and others indicated that they preferred English in advertising texts only because of the low standard of Arabic translation. English may therefore be viewed in a less neutral way than in other parts of the world. While our study provides new insights into attitudes towards BELF in advertising within this community, it would be important to confirm the findings with follow-up interviews or focus group discussions, with respondents who may be willing to continue after initially

participating in the survey. This could also be an effective way to acquire a more in-depth understanding of how such attitudes may be impacted by the multicultural reality in which Emirati consumers must necessarily interact.

Future research could also look at the effects of using BELF in advertising campaigns targeted at the local communities elsewhere in the Gulf Region (e.g. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar etc.), where English is also widely used as a lingua franca in numerous social domains. Studies such as these could focus not only on the use of different languages in print advertising, but also investigate the use of and attitudes towards BELF use in social media and other forms of web-based communication, as increasingly prominent communicative genre that can be used to convey an advertising message. In addition, it would be useful to investigate the impact of using appeals in advertising that are associated with Arabic culture in general, and Islamic culture in particular. In doing so, communication scholars would make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the influence of both language and culture on advertising in an increasingly globalized and multicultural Middle East.

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**Table 1.** Responses to English Versus Arabic Advertisements by Language of Questionnaire.

	English Version of Ad	Arabic Version of Ad
English language questionnaire	49 (32.2%)	53 (34.2%)
Arabic language questionnaire	103 (67.8%)	101 (65.8%)
Total	152 (100.0%)	154 (100.0%)

**Table 2.** Frequency of Explanations of the Meaning of the Corporate Slogan Connecting People.

Input	%
Connects people	43.4
Social connection	13.2
International connection	7.2
Ad on Nokia features	0.3
Literal translation into Arabic	0.3

**Table 3.** Reasons Cited for Ad Language Preferences.

	Prefer Ad in Arabic (n)	Prefer Ad in English (n)	No Preference (n)	Total
First language is Arabic	50	0	1	51
Easier to understand	38	15	1	54
Understand both	2	1	38	41
Happy with both languages	0	0	9	9
English reaches a wider population	0	13	4	17
Ads not related to language	0	0	7	7
Translated poorly into Arabic	1	1	12	14
Respect for culture	3	1	1	5
Total	94	31	73	198

Note. *n* = number of responses.

**Table 4.** Attitudes Toward Ad Language by Demographics for the Entire Population of Respondents.

	Prefer Ad in Arabic (n)	Prefer ad in English (n)	No preference (n)	Total
Male	26	12	22	60
Female	99	36	111	246
Total	125	48	133	306
Age group				
20–30	82	33	108	223
31–45	36	10	19	65
46+	7	5	4	16
Total	125	48	131	304
Missing values				2
Level of education				
Primary	5	2	3	10
High school	38	15	24	77
University	82	31	106	219
Total	125	48	133	306
Employment				
Student	55	27	83	165
Not working	20	2	9	31
Government	37	14	30	81
Private sector	13	5	10	28
Total	135	48	132	305
Missing values				1

**Table 5.** Attitudes Toward Ad Language by Demographics for Participants Who Received the English Ad.

	Prefer Ad in Arabic (n)	Prefer Ad in English (n)	No Preference (n)	Total
Male	15	7	11	33
Female	43	20	56	119
Total	58	27	67	152
Age group				
20–30	37	18	55	110
31–45	16	6	9	31
46+	5	3	1	9
Total	58	27	65	150
Missing values				2
Level of education				
Primary	3	0	2	5
High school	16	12	12	40
University	39	15	53	107
Total	58	27	67	152
Employment				
Student	24	15	46	85
Not working	10	0	6	16
Government	17	9	10	36
Private sector	7	3	4	14
Total	58	27	66	151

Note. n = number of participants.

**Table 6.** Attitudes Toward Ad Language by Demographics for Participants Who Received the Arabic Ad.

	Prefer Ad in Arabic ( <i>n</i> )	Prefer Ad in English ( <i>n</i> )	No Preference ( <i>n</i> )	Total
Male	11	5	11	27
Female	56	16	55	127
Total	67	21	66	154
Age group				
20–30	45	15	53	113
31–45	20	4	10	34
46+	2	2	3	7
Total	67	21	66	154
Level of education				
Primary	2	2	1	5
High school	22	3	12	37
University	43	16	53	112
Total	67	21	66	154
Employment				
Student	31	12	37	80
Not working	10	2	3	15
Government	20	5	20	45
Private sector	6	2	6	14
Total	67	21	66	154

Note. *n* = number of participants.

## Appendix

### Short Survey on Advertising in the UAE

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- (1) What is your opinion of the product advertised in the text given to you? Please complete the following 5-point scale by ticking the appropriate box for each of the characteristics listed below. For example, Box 1 indicates that you consider the product to be very attractive whereas Box 5 indicates that you consider the product to be very unattractive.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Attractive	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unattractive
Basic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Advanced
Expensive	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Inexpensive
Boring	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Fun
Stylish	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unstylish

- (2) What is your opinion of the advertisement? Please complete the following 5-point scale by ticking the appropriate box for each of the characteristics listed below. For example, Box 1 indicates that you consider the advertisement to be very unattractive whereas Box 5 indicates that you consider the advertisement to be very attractive.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Unattractive	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Attractive
Modern	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Old fashioned
Ineffective	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Effective
Fun	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Boring
Unstylish	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Stylish

- (3) Would you be interested in buying the product? Yes  No

- (4) Do you understand the meaning of the phrase *Connecting People* in the text? Yes  No

If you answered Yes to this question, please describe what this means. You may give a translation if you wish, but please also describe the meaning of the phrase in your own words.

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- (5) Are you able to hold a conversation in English? Yes  No

- (6) Please decide which ONE of the following statements best describes your attitude towards the language used in advertising:

- i) I prefer advertising in Arabic   
ii) I prefer advertising in English   
iii) I have no preference

Please explain in more detail why you made your choice:

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- (7) Please complete the survey by answering the following questions about yourself by ticking the relevant box in each case:

- (a) Gender: Male  Female   
(b) Age group: 20–30  31–45  46+   
(c) Education level: Primary school  High school   
University/Higher Colleges of Technology   
(d) Employment: Student  Not working   
Government  Private sector

Thank You For Your Cooperation

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