

ENGLISH OR A LOCAL LANGUAGE IN ADVERTISING?

The Appreciation of Easy and Difficult English Slogans in the Netherlands

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Studies have demonstrated frequent use of English in international advertising, but little is known about people's preference for English versus local languages. This article empirically investigated the difficulty of the English language as a possible determinant of people's preference for English or the local language. In an experiment, Dutch participants judged a number of car ads with English slogans that were pretested as easy or difficult to understand. They were subsequently asked to express a preference for either the English slogan or the Dutch equivalent. Results showed that easy-to-understand English slogans were appreciated better than difficult-to-understand English slogans. Moreover, the degree of difficulty in comprehension of the English slogans affected participants' preference for English. English was preferred to Dutch when it was easy to understand; when it was difficult to understand, English was appreciated as much as the Dutch equivalent. In conclusion, the experiment provides empirical support for the role of comprehension in the preference for and appreciation of English in international advertising.

Keywords: adaptation; advertising; comprehension; English; standardization; text appreciation

In international advertising, English is widely used by businesses to communicate with their customers. Studies have demonstrated frequent use of English in television and print advertising (e.g., Bhatia, 1992; Piller, 2000)

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in non-English-speaking countries. Little is known, however, about the effectiveness of English as compared with local languages (in terms of, e.g., preference, appreciation of the text, attitude toward the product, and purchase intention). Is English always a better choice in international advertising, or are there restrictions on the effectiveness of this choice? In this article, we empirically investigate the difficulty in comprehension of the English language as a possible determinant of people's preference for English or the local language.

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN INTERNATIONAL ADVERTISING

As markets continue to expand, businesses have to communicate with a growing number of national and international stakeholders. One of the largest stakeholder groups are consumers. In their communication with consumers, advertising is an important tool for businesses, whether it is for announcing product launches, price promotions, or product availability. When advertising in different countries, businesses face a strategic choice between standardization or adaptation of their advertisements. The topic of standardization versus adaptation has received wide research attention in the field of international business communication (e.g., Leininger, 1997) and international advertising (e.g., Agrawal, 1995; Zou, 2005). When it comes to advertising, the debate has centered on the question as to whether the same advertisement can be used in different countries or whether it should be adapted to each of the different countries where it is used.

English in Standardized International Advertising

For companies, standardization of advertising brings a number of benefits (see, for an overview, White, 2000). First, a standardized campaign instead of various local campaigns is likely to result in economies of scale. Second, standardization provides companies more control over their activities across borders and gives them the full opportunity to exploit good creative ideas in different countries. Third, standardization enables businesses to create a global corporate brand image that has a similar positioning in international markets. Instruments that may create such global image are, among others, the brand name, logo, slogan, and headline. The English language comes into play when slogans and headlines are used. When addressing international stakeholders in a similar, standardized way, English is

the obvious language to use. In fact, English has been well documented to be the most frequently used language in advertising (e.g., Bhatia, 1992; Gerritsen et al., 2007; Piller, 2000). This frequent use of English as a lingua franca is in line with its use in international business communication more generally, ranging from internal communication in multinationals (e.g., Kankaanranta, 2006) and mergers and acquisitions (e.g., Charles, 2007; Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005) to business-to-business communication (e.g., Vandermeeren, 1999) and annual reports (e.g., De Groot, 2008).

When it comes to advertising, the debate has centered on the question as to whether the same advertisement can be used in different countries or whether it should be adapted to each of the different countries where it is used.

Adaptation in International Advertising

However promising the benefits of standardized international advertising may appear, standardization has received criticism. De Mooij (2005), among others, has claimed that adaptation of advertisements to the needs and tastes of each local culture is a precondition for successful advertising. This claim is based on cultural studies that have demonstrated that cultures differ in their value hierarchies, that is, their rankings of which values are relatively important or relatively unimportant (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). If adaptation is an effective strategy, ads that appeal to important cultural values (such as independence in the United States or loyalty in Mexico) should be more persuasive than ads that appeal to relatively unimportant cultural values (such as loyalty in the United States or independence in Mexico). A number of empirical studies have investigated this comparison between culturally adapted and culturally unadapted ad appeals (e.g., Han & Shavitt, 1994; Hoeken et al., 2003). Hornikx and O'Keefe (2009) summarized the findings of such studies in a meta-analysis and showed that, in general, ads

with culturally adapted value appeals are more persuasive and better liked than ads with culturally unadapted value appeals. This finding may be interpreted as evidence in favor of the adaptation strategy, although it does not include a cost-effectiveness analysis. That is to say, adaptation may be more effective than standardization, but it is not known at what price such effects are obtained.

English Versus the Local Language

Standardization versus adaptation in advertising is not limited to value appeals—the language in the ad may also be considered as a tool to standardize or to adapt the ad. If language is taken as a basis for standardization or adaptation, the question then is whether ads with English (standardized) are more persuasive than ads with the local language (adapted). There have been only a few empirical studies that compare English with local languages in advertising. Shoham (1996) compared a standardized, English commercial with a localized, Israeli commercial, but these commercials differed in many ways, including the brand, actors, and background of both commercials. These differences hamper any comparison between the language strategies. Therefore, the preference for the local language ad that was found cannot be clearly attributed to a language effect. Gerritsen et al. (2007) found hardly any differences in the effectiveness of English ads and ads with a local language. They compared the effect of the use of English in product advertisements as opposed to Dutch, German, and Spanish on highly educated young women from Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain. For three out of the four ads tested, there were no significant differences between ads containing English and local language equivalents in attitudes toward the language used in the ads. In one case, the Dutch respondents' attitude was significantly more positive for the all-Dutch ad than for the ad containing English. Also, the product was perceived to be more modern in an ad containing English than in the local language for two of the four ads evaluated by Spanish women and for one ad evaluated by Dutch women. In a series of experiments, Puntoni, De Langhe, and Van Osselaer (2008) showed that respondents perceived their local language in advertising as more emotional than English. Ahn and La Ferle (2008) compared responses of Korean participants to an ad with body copy in Korean and in English. They found that recall and recognition were higher for the Korean body copy than for the English body copy. Finally, Krishna and Ahluwalia (2008) investigated the role of type of company (multinational vs. local) and type of product (luxury vs. necessity) in

the effectiveness of a local, Hindi slogan versus an English slogan. The results showed that, when the company was a multinational, respondents evaluated an English slogan more favorably than a Hindi slogan for a luxury product (chocolate), whereas a Hindi slogan was evaluated more favorably for a necessity product (detergent). The English slogan was associated more with sophistication, and the Hindi slogan was associated more with belongingness.

In conclusion, there is not much evidence as to whether standardized ads with English are evaluated more or less positively than ads with the local language. In the present study comparing English and a local language, a particular issue will be addressed—namely, the difficulty of the English that is used in advertising.

DOES COMPREHENSION OF ENGLISH AFFECT ITS APPRECIATION?

In the literature, contrasting suggestions and empirical findings can be found about the importance of comprehension of English in advertising.

Comprehension of English Does Not Matter

Different researchers have argued that foreign languages are mainly used as a symbol, for which the literal meaning of the utterance in the foreign language does not matter (e.g., Haarmann, 1989; Kelly-Holmes, 2000, 2005; Piller, 2001; Ray, Ryder, & Scott, 1991). Haarmann (1989) investigated the use of different European languages in Japanese advertising. He found that languages such as English, French, German, and Spanish were frequently used. Because the Japanese generally cannot read or understand European languages, Haarmann argues that these languages must have a symbolic meaning—that is, they evoke associations with the country where the languages are spoken and with their inhabitants. This claim has been substantiated in an empirical study, in which Dutch respondents were found to associate the French language with beauty and elegance and the German language with reliability and technicality (Hornikx, Van Meurs, & Starren, 2007). No such empirical evidence is available for the symbolic associations evoked by the use of English as a foreign language in advertising. However, there have been numerous claims about English evoking associations of globalism, modernity, and prestige (e.g., Alm, 2003; Bhatia, 1992, 2001; Kelly-Holmes, 2005; Piller, 2001).

According to the symbolic view of foreign language use in advertising, a foreign language is considered as a symbol for which the actual meaning is not important. Piller (2001, p. 163) notes that "even if the audience does not understand the denotational message of the English [...] they will recognize that the message is in English, and they will activate their stereotypes about English." This means that English can be successfully used regardless of whether it is understood or not. In this view, it does not matter whether English is easy or difficult. Thus, regardless of whether English is understood, English would be well appreciated by consumers because of the positive associations it has been claimed to evoke.

Comprehension of English Affects Appreciation

According to Sperber and Wilson's (1995) relevance theory, if people have to put more effort into comprehending a message than they feel is warranted by the information they gain from it, they may become frustrated. The difficulty of a foreign language use in an advertising message may similarly frustrate the readers and therefore negatively affect their appreciation of the ad and the language used in it (e.g., in terms of how sympathetic, interesting, or irritating they find it). There are only a few experimental studies that have investigated the importance of comprehension of foreign languages, including English, for the appreciation of those foreign languages in advertising. Gerritsen, Korzilius, Van Meurs, and Gijbers (2000) investigated the appreciation and the comprehension of six partly or completely English television commercials broadcast in the Netherlands. They found that participants' appreciation for the use of English in these commercials increased when their comprehension was higher. Finally, Hornikx and Starren (2006) also found support for the relationship between comprehension and appreciation, albeit for another foreign language: the French language for Dutch participants. The results of their experiment showed that slogans that were easy to understand were more appreciated than slogans that were hard to understand.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The frequent use of the English language in international business communication, in general, and in international advertising, in particular, may suggest that this use is beneficial. In advertising, both English utterances and equivalent utterances in a local language can be used, but hardly any attention has been paid to the question of what may determine the choice

between the two languages. In this article, this question is addressed with a focus on the comprehension of English.

The relevant literature on foreign language use in advertising is equivocal when it comes to the role comprehension of English plays in its appreciation. The dominant framework argues that the comprehension and difficulty of English does not matter because English serves a symbolic function. In the one study that did investigate this claim empirically, a result was found that contradicted this claim: the appreciation of English in ads was found to be affected by its comprehension (Gerritsen et al., 2000). A limitation of the Gerritsen et al. (2000) study was that the roles of the English utterances in the materials were diverse, ranging from all English ads (for which comprehension is likely to be more important) to ads with little English, which was glossed with Dutch translations (for which comprehension is likely to be less important). This diversity in the ads may have affected the findings. Thus, further research on the relationship between comprehension and appreciation of English is necessary (see Ahn & La Ferle, 2008). The first research question of this article, therefore, is as follows:

RQ1: Are easy-to-understand English slogans in ads better appreciated than difficult-to-understand English slogans?

The main question of the present study is whether the difficulty in comprehension of English affects consumers' preference for English or their own local language. Although this question has not been empirically researched, there is one study that investigated the effect of comprehension on the preference for a local language versus a foreign language other than English—namely, French. Hornikx and Starren (2006) had Dutch participants choose between ads with French slogans and equivalent ads with Dutch slogans. When the French slogans were easy to understand, the participants preferred the French to the Dutch ads; when the French slogans were difficult to understand, they clearly preferred the Dutch to the French ads. This study can only provide a hint as to the role of comprehension in consumer's preference for English versus a local language in advertising. The second research question therefore reads as follows:

RQ2: Does the difficulty in comprehension of English in ads affect the choice between English or a local language?

Addressing these research questions will sharpen our understanding of whether the English language may override a local language in

advertising and of what level of English—difficult or easy—may be preferred in international advertising.

METHOD

In the present study, the local language was operationalized as the Dutch language in the Netherlands, and standardization or adaptation in the ad was manipulated in the ad's English or Dutch slogan. An experiment was set up to investigate the relationship between the comprehension and the appreciation of English slogans in Dutch advertisements. Participants first indicated their appreciation and comprehension of the English slogans in six ads and then expressed their preferences for these six ads versus equivalent ads with Dutch slogans. The design of this study was borrowed from Hornikx and Starren (2006).

Material

As there are no objective criteria for determining the difficulty of a foreign language utterance, actual consumer response was measured. In a pretest, 36 Dutch participants (age: $M = 29.33$, $SD = 8.76$) translated 18 authentic English slogans from car advertisements. Six slogans were selected for inclusion in the main experiment based on the number of correct translations into Dutch. Three slogans that were translated in accordance with the researchers' translation by the majority of the participants were considered "easy": "A better idea," "Driving is believing," and "Find your own road." Three slogans that were incorrectly translated by the majority of the participants were considered "difficult": "Relieve gas pains," "Sheer driving pleasure," and "Once driven, forever smitten."

The main experiment consisted of two parts. The first part included six ads each containing a different English slogan, a simple image of a car, an indication of the type of car (Rover 25, Rover 45, Jaguar X-type, Jaguar S-type, Lotus Elise, Lotus Esprit), and a brand logo. To stress that the ads were aimed at a Dutch audience, each ad also contained a Dutch brand slogan that was different for each of the three brands (the English translations of these Dutch slogans read, "A class of its own" for Rover, "Born to perform" for Jaguar, and "Change the rules" for Lotus).

The second part of the experiment involved six pairs of ads, each pair containing the English advertisement participants had just seen and the same advertisement with an equivalent Dutch slogan (for an example, see Figure 1). The original English slogans were translated into Dutch by



Figure 1. An Example of a Pair of Ads With an English Slogan (Left) and an Equivalent Dutch Slogan (Right)

one person and then back translated into English by another person to ensure equivalent slogans (see Brislin, 1980).

Participants

In all, 120 working Dutch people participated in the experiment. Participants ($N = 120$) had various educational backgrounds, ranging from lower vocational education to a master's degree; 60% of the participants were male. The average age was 33.99 years ($SD = 11.93$) and ranged from 20 to 63 years. The participants in the six versions of the material (see the following section) did not significantly differ in gender distribution [$\chi^2(5) = 0.83, p = .98$], mean age [$F(5, 114) < 1$], or educational level [$\chi^2(15) = 11.64, p = .71$].

Research Design

The experiment had a within-participant design because each participant judged both easy and difficult slogans. To avoid an influence of brand,

Table 1. Distribution of Cars and Slogans Over the Six Versions of the Questionnaire

<i>Version</i>		<i>Ad 1</i>	<i>Ad 2</i>	<i>Ad 3</i>	<i>Ad 4</i>	<i>Ad 5</i>	<i>Ad 6</i>
1	Car	Rover 2	Jaguar 2	Lotus 1	Rover 1	Jaguar 1	Lotus 2
	Slogan	Easy 1	Diff 1	Easy 2	Diff 2	Easy 3	Diff 3
2	Car	Jaguar 2	Lotus 1	Rover 2	Jaguar 1	Lotus 2	Rover 1
	Slogan	Diff 2	Easy 3	Easy 2	Easy 1	Diff 1	Diff 3
3	Car	Lotus 1	Rover 2	Jaguar 2	Lotus 2	Rover 1	Jaguar 1
	Slogan	Easy 1	Easy 3	Diff 3	Diff 2	Diff 1	Easy 2
4	Car	Rover 1	Jaguar 1	Lotus 2	Rover 2	Jaguar 2	Lotus 1
	Slogan	Easy 2	Diff 3	Easy 3	Diff 1	Easy 1	Diff 2
5	Car	Jaguar 1	Lotus 2	Rover 1	Jaguar 2	Lotus 1	Rover 2
	Slogan	Diff 1	Easy 1	Easy 3	Easy 2	Diff 3	Diff 2
6	Car	Lotus 2	Rover 1	Jaguar 1	Lotus 1	Rover 2	Jaguar 2
	Slogan	Easy 2	Easy 1	Diff 2	Diff 1	Diff 3	Easy 3

Note: Rover 1 = Rover 25; Rover 2 = Rover 45; Jaguar 1 = Jaguar X-type; Jaguar 2 = Jaguar S-type; Lotus 1 = Lotus Elise; Lotus 2 = Lotus Esprit; Easy 1 = easy slogan "A better idea"; Easy 2 = "Find your own road"; Easy 3 = "Driving is believing"; Diff 1 = difficult slogan "Relieve gas pains"; Diff 2 = "Sheer driving pleasure"; Diff 3 = "Once driven, forever smitten."

type of car, and order of presentation, six versions of the material were developed. Participants received one of the versions. In all six versions, each of the six slogans and each of the six cars was presented, but the combination of these two elements was different in each version (see Table 1).

Instrumentation

The instrumentation included measures of appreciation, comprehension, and preference. The questionnaire ended with questions about gender, age, and highest level of education.

Appreciation of the English slogans. Directly after each ad, participants were asked to evaluate the English slogans on eight 5-point Likert scales taken from Gerritsen et al. (2000). Four of the items were positive (*poetic*, *easy going*, *functional*, and *sympathetic*), and four were negative (*irritating*, *superfluous*, *affected*, and *arrogant*). After the negative items were recoded, the scale was found to be reliable: $\alpha = .78$ on average.

Comprehension. Following Gerritsen et al. (2000), comprehension was measured in two ways: as perceived comprehension and as actual comprehension. The perceived comprehension of the slogans was measured with

the question “Do you think you can translate the English slogan?” followed by three answers: “yes,” “no,” or “I don’t know.” The actual comprehension of the slogans was measured with the question, “What do you think is meant with the English text in the advertisement?” followed by a space with lines on which participants could write their paraphrase. Paraphrases were classified as correct, partly correct, or incorrect by two independent coders (interrater reliability was high: Cohen’s $\kappa = .98$). For the slogan “A better idea”, an example of a partly correct paraphrase was (translated from Dutch into English) “Do you have a better idea?” and an example of an incorrect paraphrase was “Better than I now think.” For the slogan “Once driven, forever smitten”, an example of a partly correct paraphrase was “Once driven, never another”, and an example of an incorrect paraphrase was “Once driven, forever infected.”

Preference. For each pair of ads, participants were asked to choose the ad they preferred: the English ad or the equivalent Dutch ad.

Procedure and Statistical Analyses

The questionnaires were given to participants individually or to participants in small groups. The whole procedure took about 15 minutes. Per slogan, the mean appreciation and the mean comprehension were calculated independently from the brand and car that figured in the ad. For the comparison of the actual comprehension of the slogans, a Friedman χ^2 test and a Wilcoxon signed-rank test were used. For the comparison of the appreciation of slogans based on ease or difficulty of comprehension, an ANOVA with repeated measures was used. For the preference measure, a nonparametric binomial test was used for each slogan separately.

RESULTS

Although the difficulty of the English slogans had been pretested, it was first checked whether the pretest results were corroborated in the experiment. Table 2 provides the percentages of participants who correctly paraphrased the slogans for each of the six slogans. The six slogans were not equally well understood [Friedman $\chi^2(5) = 216.18, p < .001$]. The three easy slogans were all correctly paraphrased by a significantly higher percentage of the participants (on average 80.3%) than the three difficult slogans (on average 31.9%). Except for one slogan, there were significant,

Table 2. Comprehension and Appreciation of the Slogans

Type	Slogan	Correctly Paraphrased	Appreciation	
			M	SD
Easy	A better idea	85.0% ^a	3.01 ^c	0.77
	Find your own road	85.0% ^a	3.22 ^b	0.71
	Driving is believing	70.8% ^b	3.39 ^a	0.71
Difficult	Once driven, forever smitten	45.8% ^c	3.15 ^{b,c}	0.76
	Sheer driving pleasure	35.8% ^c	3.17 ^{b,c}	0.68
	Relieve gas pains	14.2% ^d	2.80 ^d	0.69

Note: Slogans with a different superscript differ significantly in level of comprehension or appreciation. For comprehension, the level of significance is $p = .01$; for appreciation, the level of significance is $p = .05$.

positive relationships between the perceived comprehension (“yes, I can translate,” “no, I cannot translate”) and the actual comprehension (correct, incorrect) of the English slogans.¹ That is, when participants thought they would be able to translate the slogan correctly, their paraphrase was more likely to be correct than when they thought they could not translate the slogan correctly.

RQ1 about the appreciation of easy and difficult English was answered positively: The English slogans categorized on the basis of the pretest as easy to understand ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.55$) were better appreciated than the English slogans categorized as difficult to understand ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.55$): $F(1, 110) = 5.66$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .05$.

RQ2 addressed the preference for English or the domestic language, Dutch. For each participant, the number of preferred ads with an English slogan (which could range from 0 to 3) was counted for the easy slogans and for the difficult slogans. A first step toward answering RQ2 was to test whether that number of preferred English ads was higher for the easy slogans than for the difficult slogans. It was indeed found that when the English slogans were easy, participants preferred more ads with English than when the English slogans were difficult [$t(119) = 4.62$, $p < .001$]. The second step toward answering RQ2 was to test whether, for easy and for difficult slogans separately, participants preferred more ads with English than ads with Dutch. It was found that when the slogans were easy to understand, participants preferred English to Dutch because they selected significantly more than 1.5 ads with English [$t(119) = 4.14$, $p < .001$]. On average, 64.4% of the participants preferred the easy English ads to the equivalent Dutch ads. When the slogans were difficult to understand, however, participants did not have a preference for either English or Dutch

Table 3. Preference for the English or the Dutch Slogans in Percentages

Type	Slogan	Preference for English	Preference for Dutch
Easy	A better idea	57.6%	42.4%
	Find your own road	64.7%**	35.3%
	Driving is believing	70.8%***	29.2%
Difficult	Once driven, forever smitten	45.8%	54.2%
	Sheer driving pleasure	32.5%	67.5%***
	Relieve gas pains	67.5%***	32.5%

Note: Asterisks indicate a significant preference for English or Dutch found with binomial tests.

** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

[$t(199) = 0.09, p = .93$]. On average, 48.6% of the participants preferred the difficult English ads to the equivalent Dutch ads. Table 3 shows participants' preferences for each of the six slogans.

In conclusion, empirical evidence was found for a relationship between the difficulty of comprehension of the English slogan and the preference for the English or the local, Dutch slogan: Participants preferred the English slogan when it was easy to understand and did not have a preference when the slogan was difficult to understand.

Alternative Analyses

One weakness of the analysis presented above is that it compared slogans that were labeled as easy or difficult regardless of the actual and perceived comprehension of the individual participants. In the first alternative analysis concerning RQ1, the data set was reduced in such a way that a comparison was made between the appreciation of easy slogans that were paraphrased correctly and the appreciation of difficult slogans that were not correctly paraphrased. As in the main analysis, easy, correctly paraphrased slogans ($M = 3.30, SD = 0.66$) were better appreciated than difficult, incorrectly paraphrased slogans ($M = 3.03, SD = 0.61$): $F(1, 103) = 9.34, p < .01, \eta^2 = .08$. In the second alternative analysis, a comparison was made between the appreciation of easy slogans that participants thought they would be able to translate correctly and the appreciation of difficult slogans that they thought they could not translate correctly. The difference between the two types of slogans was more pronounced than in the main analysis: Easy slogans ($M = 3.37, SD = 0.54$) were better appreciated than difficult slogans ($M = 2.92, SD = 0.57$): $F(1, 60) = 24.93, p < .001, \eta^2 = .29$.

Table 4. Preference for the English Slogans in the Alternative Analyses

<i>Type</i>	<i>Slogan</i>	<i>Actual Comprehension</i>	<i>Perceived Comprehension</i>
Easy	A better idea	56.0%	57.7%
	Find your own road	64.6%**	66.4%**
	Driving is believing	72.9%***	72.3%***
Difficult	Once driven, forever smitten	43.3%	29.0%*
	Sheer driving pleasure	27.1%**	16.0%**
	Relieve gas pains	70.8%***	58.5%

Note: Asterisks indicate a significant preference for English or Dutch found with binomial tests.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

The same two alternative analyses were conducted for RQ2. Table 4 reports the percentages of participants who preferred the English to the Dutch slogans.

It was indeed found that when the English slogans were easy, participants preferred more ads with English than when the English slogans were difficult.

Because of missing data,² it could not be tested whether participants preferred more ads with English than ads with Dutch. Binomial tests, however, were conducted for each slogan separately (see Table 4). For two of the three easy slogans, participants significantly preferred the English to the Dutch slogans, both when actual and perceived comprehension were taken into account. For the difficult slogans, the results were mixed: Participants preferred the equivalent Dutch slogan in three of the six cases, preferred the English version in one case, and did not have a preference in two cases.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The predominance of the English language in international business communication raises a number of questions, such as to what extent the

use of English is an effective choice—that is, how well it is received by consumers. This article addressed this question by focusing on the issue of possible differences in preference for English or a local language (in this case Dutch) in print advertising—an issue that has received little research attention. More specifically, the role of the difficulty of the English language in people’s preference for English or the local language (Dutch) was investigated. In the present study, an experiment was conducted in which participants viewed a number of Dutch car advertisements with English slogans that had been found to be easy or difficult to understand in a pretest.

The Role of Comprehension of English

Results showed that the easy English slogans were better appreciated than the difficult English slogans (RQ1). This result was corroborated in alternative analyses in which the comparison was corrected for actual comprehension (correctly paraphrased or not) or for perceived comprehension (“I think I can translate it correctly” vs. “I don’t think I can translate it correctly”). The effect of perceived comprehension on appreciation was even greater than the effect of the difficulty (easy or difficult) as determined on the basis of correctness of translations in a pretest. This means that the perception people have of the difficulty of an English slogan may be more important for their appreciation of the English slogan than their actual ability to paraphrase the slogan correctly.

The differences that were found between the easy and difficult English slogans were rather small. The difficult English slogans were on the midpoint of the appreciation scale [$t(113) = 1.19, p = .24$], and the easy English slogans were just above the midpoint of that scale [$t(116) = 3.95, p < .001$]. One possible explanation for this small difference is that characteristics of the slogans, other than the difficulty of the English, affect the appreciation that it receives. One simple indication in favor of this interpretation is that there were also differences in appreciation within each group of slogans. For instance, the slogan “Driving is believing” was significantly better appreciated than the two other easy slogans, “Find your own road” and “A better idea.” A strength of the present experiment is that it did not compare one easy slogan with one difficult slogan but three easy slogans with three difficult slogans. Such a multiple message design allows a better generalization of the research findings than a single message design (e.g., Jackson, 1992). This is not to say that the present findings provide a definitive answer to the question as to whether comprehension matters or not, but the experiment does provide empirical evidence that

easy English slogans are better appreciated than difficult English slogans—at least English slogans in similar car ads judged by Dutch participants.

The Preference for English Versus the Local Language

When participants compared English slogans with their local language (Dutch) equivalents, comprehension played a larger role than when they indicated their appreciation for the six individual English slogans. In the second part of the experiment, participants were asked to express a preference for either Dutch or English versions of the same six slogans. Here, the difficulty of the English slogan more clearly affected people's preference for English or the local, Dutch language. English was preferred to Dutch when it was easy to understand; when it was difficult to understand, English was appreciated as much as the Dutch equivalent. It is interesting to compare these results with the results in Hornikx and Starren (2006), in which participants were asked to choose between car ads with a French slogan (easy or difficult) and car ads with an equivalent domestic Dutch slogan. The results are similar when the slogans were easy. Just as the participants in the present study preferred the easy foreign-language (English) ads to the equivalent Dutch ads, participants in Hornikx and Starren (2006) preferred the easy French ads (55.8%) to the equivalent Dutch ads. Results diverge when the slogans were difficult. Whereas participants did not have a preference for either the difficult English or Dutch ads in the present study, participants in Hornikx and Starren (2006) clearly preferred the Dutch ads (75.3%). This suggests that using English slogans for car ads for Dutch participants is less risky than using French slogans. English slogans are still appreciated even if they are difficult.

The findings of the present study are in line with results obtained in earlier experimental studies related to English (Gerritsen et al., 2000) and French (Hornikx & Starren, 2006) as foreign languages in advertising: Comprehension affects appreciation. These results challenge the symbolic view of foreign languages in advertising advocated by a number of scholars (Haarmann, 1989; Kelly-Holmes, 2000, 2005; Piller, 2001; Ray et al., 1991) who argue that the comprehension of foreign-language utterances in advertising is largely irrelevant. However, the present study does not disconfirm the symbolic role of foreign languages. In fact, the results of the preference measure in the present study suggest that English (as a foreign language) does add something symbolic to the ad because English was preferred to Dutch when it was easy to understand. If English did not have any symbolic meaning, there would be no difference in the preference

between English and the local, Dutch slogan. Therefore, we argue that the relationship between foreign languages and advertising is more complex than advocated by the symbolic view.

Practical Implications and Future Research

For businesses that advertise in different countries, the choice between standardization or adaptation may be an important one (e.g., Agrawal, 1995). The English language may be considered as an instrument to standardize advertisements. The present research provides empirical support for the practice of standardization (using English) instead of adaptation (using a local language). In this study, English was preferred to the local, Dutch language when the English slogan was easy to understand, and it was appreciated as much as Dutch when it was difficult to understand. On the one hand, therefore, it seems that businesses should not have to bother too much about the difficulty of the English utterance that is used. On the other hand, easy English was found to be appreciated even more than difficult English, suggesting that businesses should strive for easy English. The present study also underlines the need for pretesting English slogans in two ways. Both the actual and perceived comprehension of the English slogan or utterance should be pretested. English slogans that participants are able to paraphrase or translate and that they think they are able to paraphrase or translate correctly may be best suited to generate good consumer response.

In conclusion, this experiment provides empirical support for the usefulness of standardizing ads by using the English language and for the role of comprehension in the preference for English in international advertising. The limitations of the experiment may inspire future research. First, standardization or adaptation of the language in the present study was limited to the slogan only. Although slogans have been argued to be “the most salient element of advertising” (Krishna & Ahluwalia, 2008, p. 697), studies may consider more extensive manipulations of English versus a local language—not only a slogan but body copy and headline as well. Second, the effectiveness of the language choice was measured only in terms of appreciation. To measure effectiveness more fully, attitude toward the product, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intention may be included in future instrumentations. Obvious limitations, finally, relate to the product type (cars only) and the language/nationality of the participants (Dutch). Future research comparing English with local languages other than Dutch for diverse products will enhance our understanding of the effectiveness of the English language in international advertising.

NOTES

1. The relationship between perceived and actual comprehension was significant for “A better idea” [$\chi^2(1) = 15.14, p < .001$], “Find your own road” [$\chi^2(1) = 14.26, p < .001$], “Relieve gas pains” [$\chi^2(1) = 9.11, p < .01$], “Sheer driving pleasure” [$\chi^2(1) = 17.79, p < .001$], and “Once driven, forever smitten” [$\chi^2(1) = 19.15, p < .001$] but not for “Driving is believing” [$\chi^2(1) = 0.66, p = .44$].

2. For such a test, the number of preferred ads with an English slogan out of the total of three ads should be counted. However, preference scores were absent in those cases where participants did not paraphrase the easy slogan correctly or where they paraphrased the difficult slogan correctly (actual comprehension), or when they thought they would not be able to translate the easy slogan correctly or when they thought they would be able to translate the difficult slogan correctly (perceived comprehension).

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