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**The same or different? Spanish-speaking consumers' response to the use of English or Spanish in product advertisements in Spain and the USA**

Andreu van Hooft, Department of Communication and Information Studies, Centre for Language Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands

Frank van Meurs, Department of Communication and Information Studies, Centre for Language Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands

Linda Schellekens, former MA student Department of Communication and Information Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands

Corresponding author: Andreu van Hooft, Radboud University (the Netherlands),  
Erasmusplein 1, k. 5.21, 6525 HT, Nijmegen (the Netherlands), [a.v.hooft@let.ru.nl](mailto:a.v.hooft@let.ru.nl),  
+31 24 3616015 or +31 24 3612045, fax nr. +31 24 3612177

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## **The same or different? Spanish-speaking consumers' response to the use of English or Spanish in product advertisements in Spain and the USA**

### **ABSTRACT**

Sociolinguistic research suggests that US Hispanic and Spanish consumers may differ in their response to ads with English and Spanish. An experiment with US Hispanic ( $N = 97$ ) and Spanish ( $N = 132$ ) participants showed that, although US Hispanic participants indicated that they used more English and less Spanish in various situations, and had a less positive general attitude to English than did Spanish participants, there were no differences in evaluations of ads with English or Spanish by the two groups. These findings indicate that there is not always a direct relation between general sociolinguistic circumstances/attitudes and ad response.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Both in the US and Spain, Spanish-speaking consumers are addressed through advertisements in English and Spanish (Callow and McDonald, 2005; Gerritsen et al, 2007b). However, the status of English and Spanish in the two countries is very different. While in the US English is the majority language and Spanish is the language of a minority (Ryan, 2011; US Census, 2011), in Spain English is a foreign language and Spanish the majority language (Constitución Española, 1978; Eurobarometer, 2012). This different status of English and Spanish may lead to different attitudes to the two languages in the two countries, including different attitudes to their use in advertising. This line of argument is based on insights from sociolinguistic research, which indicates that “language use influences the formation of group identity, and group identity influences patterns of language attitudes and usage” (Lawson and Sachdev, 2004, p. 56).

Sociolinguistic considerations can explain why it is to be expected that the language attitudes of Spaniards and Hispanics could differ. There are some grounds for assuming that Hispanics have a more positive attitude to Spanish than English, while Spaniards prefer English in advertising. In the case of the US Hispanics, it has been argued that Spanish in advertising may serve as the advertiser's marker of solidarity with Spanish-speaking consumers and is therefore better appreciated (Koslow et al, 1998), following the logic of accommodation theory (Giles et al. 1991). Since US Hispanics are a Spanish-speaking linguistic minority in the US, Spanish to them may serve a strong identity marker (cf. Fishman 1989; Deshpande et al., 1986). In the case of Spain, the use of English in advertising has been argued to signal prestige because of the status of English as a global language symbolizing modernity, progress and globalization (Bhatia, 1992; Gerritsen et al., 2000; Piller, 2003). On the other hand, there are also sociolinguistic considerations to suggest that Hispanic consumers interpret English in advertising as signaling prestige, since English is the majority language in the US (Luna and Peracchio, 2005a, 2005b). Moreover, since US Hispanics are more exposed to English in their daily lives than Spaniards, US Hispanics may be more familiar with English and therefore may accept it more readily and manifest more positive attitudes towards English according to the mere exposure effect theory (Zajonc, 1968). Since there are conflicting indications as to possible differences in language preferences of Hispanics and Spaniards, it is important to empirically investigate how these two groups evaluate the use of English and Spanish in advertisements.

To date, no studies would appear to have explicitly compared the reactions of US Hispanics and Spaniards to English and Spanish in advertisements. However, experimental studies on each of the two Spanish-speaking groups separately suggest that their evaluations may be different. For US Hispanics with Spanish as the dominant language, the use of Spanish in ads has, in a number of cases, been found to lead to more positive evaluations than the use of English (for overviews, see Hernández and Newman, 1992; Dubish, 2001; Beniflah and Chatterjee, 2015). For Spaniards, earlier research has found no differences in evaluation of ads with English and ads with Spanish (Gerritsen et al, 2007a, 2010). Sociolinguistic research argues that there may be a difference between general language attitudes and specific language attitudes depending, for instance, on the situation and the speaker (Schoel et al. 2013). Therefore the current study takes into account general attitudes towards English and Spanish and also specific attitudes to English and Spanish used in advertising.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The aim of the experiment was to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does general language attitude towards Spanish and English differ between Spaniards and US Hispanics?

RQ2: What is the effect of the use of English or Spanish in advertising on Spaniards' and US Hispanics' attitudes towards the advertisement, attitude towards the product, and purchase intention?

## **METHOD**

### **Design and Participants**

The experiment in this study had a between-within-subjects post-test-only design, with language version of the advertisement (English and Spanish) and nationality (US Hispanics and Spaniards) as between-subjects factors. We included product type category (high/low involvement, based on Rossiter, Percy and Donovan 1991) as within-subjects factor to control for the effect of product type and to increase generalizability. 229 participants, Spaniards and US bilingual (Spanish- and English-speaking) Hispanics took part in a paper-and-pencil experiment. We selected only participants who indicated that Spanish was their mother tongue, and all participants were university students. The US Hispanic sample consisted of 97 participants (56.7% women; mean age: 20.13 years; range = 17–29 years;  $SD = 2.08$ ). Their mean self-assessed Spanish proficiency was 4.39 ( $SD = 0.62$ ) and self-assessed English proficiency was 4.83 ( $SD = 0.26$ ) (1 = very low proficiency, 5 = very high proficiency). The Spanish sample consisted of 132 participants (42.4% women; mean age: 20.31 years; range = 17–31 years;  $SD = 2.54$ ). The mean self-assessed Spanish proficiency was 4.92 ( $SD = .31$ ) and self-assessed English proficiency was 3.21 ( $SD = 0.83$ ) (1 = very low proficiency, 5 = very high proficiency).

A series of statistical tests were conducted to assess the homogeneity of distribution of participant characteristics between the four experimental groups. A series of Chi-square tests between language version and participant characteristics (nationality, gender, language use of English and Spanish at home, at university, with friends, with fellow students, with professor) showed no significant relations (all  $p$ 's  $>.456$ ). The four groups were homogeneous in age (all  $F < 1$ ). However, the self-assessed Spanish language proficiency of the US Hispanic group ( $M = 4.39$ ;  $SD = 0.62$ ) was significantly lower than that of the Spanish group ( $M = 4.92$ ;  $SD = 0.31$ ;  $t(128,201) = 7.61$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The self-assessed English language proficiency of the US Hispanic group ( $M = 4.82$ ;  $SD = 0.26$ ) was significantly higher than that of the Spanish group ( $M = 3.20$ ;

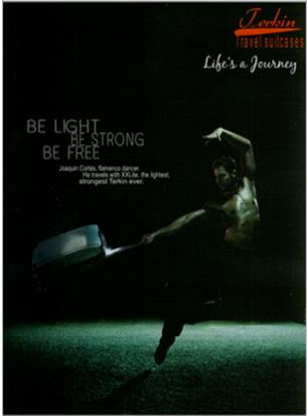
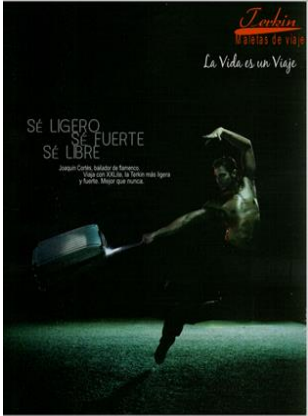
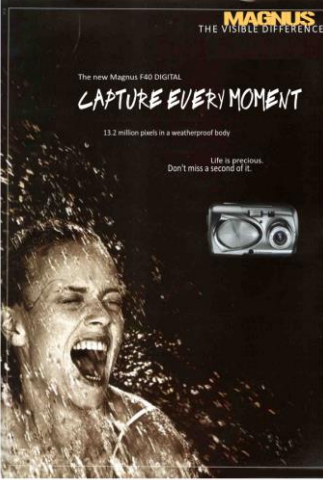
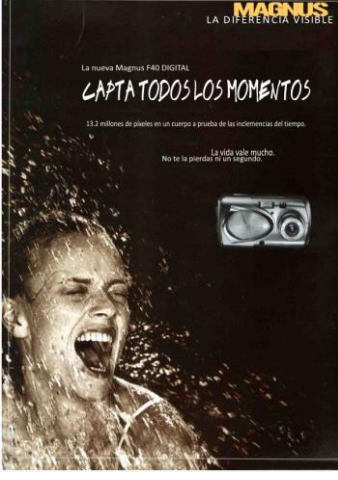
$SD = 0.82$ ;  $t(155,272) = 20.54$ ;  $p < .001$ ). A series of Fisher's exact tests between nationality (Spanish, US Hispanics) and five language use measures showed that more Hispanics than Spaniards reported using mainly English at home, speaking mainly English with friends, speaking mainly English with fellow students, speaking mainly English at university, speaking mainly English with their professor (all  $p$ 's  $< .001$ ). A series of Chi Square tests and one Fisher's exact test between nationality (Spanish, US Hispanics) and five language use measures showed that more Spaniards than Hispanics reported using mainly Spanish at home, speaking mainly Spanish with friends, speaking mainly Spanish with fellow students, speaking mainly Spanish at university, speaking mainly Spanish with their professor (all  $p$ 's  $< .001$ ). In summary, English self-assessed proficiency and use were consistently higher for the US Hispanics than for the Spaniards, while Spanish self-assessed proficiency and use were consistently higher for the Spaniards than for the US Hispanics.

### Materials, Measures and Procedure

In order to increase the experiment's ecological validity, the stimuli were based on real product ads used in Spain and the USA. We replaced the original text of the ads with new English text and slogans. In order to prevent brand associations, we replaced the original three brand names with fictitious brand names, which could be used in both Spanish and US markets. A native speaker of Spanish afterwards translated the English text and the slogans of all three ads into Spanish. The first advertisement depicted a low involvement product, an adhesive paper note, with the brand name "Sticker" and the slogan "When people count on you, count on Sticker notes". The second advertisement showed a suitcase, a product that could be classified as a between low and high involvement product, with the brand name "Terkin" and the slogan "Life is a journey". The third advertisement displayed a high involvement product, a photo camera, with the brand name "Magnus" and the slogan "Capture every moment" (see Figure 1 for all ads and language versions - English and Spanish- used in the experiment). Brand names and all visual elements were identical in the two language versions.

Figure 1 Stimuli used in the experiment

Product/Language	English	Spanish
1. Adhesive paper note		

2. Suitcase		
3. Photo camera		

Attitude towards the advertisement was measured using four 7-point semantic differential scales: Interesting - Boring, Original - Ordinary, Attractive - Unattractive, Beautiful – Ugly ( $\alpha = .79$ ; partly based on Hornikx, Van Meurs and Hof, 2013; Maes et al., 1996). Attitude towards the product was measured using four 7-point semantic differential scales: Attractive – Unattractive, Beautiful – Ugly, Of low quality – Of high quality, Very good – Very bad ( $\alpha = .71$ ; partly based on Hornikx, Van Meurs and Hof, 2013). Purchase intention was measured using three 7-point semantic differential scales: “Buying this product is something I would definitely do – I would never do, I would recommend to my friends – I would not recommend to my friends, and ‘That meets my needs – That does not meet my needs’ ( $\alpha = .82$ ; partly based on Hornikx, Van Meurs and Hof, 2013).

Self-assessed Spanish and English proficiency was measured using 5-point scales, 11 of which measured how well participants’ thought could perform certain tasks in English and Spanish (e.g. ‘Understand newspaper headlines’ (1 = very badly 5 = very well), and four of which measured how fluent they thought they were in speaking, listening, reading and writing (1 = very low; 5 like a native speaker), ( $\alpha = .97$  for English language proficiency;  $\alpha = .95$  for Spanish language proficiency; based on Luna, Peracchio and Ringberg 2008, p. 291).

The participants’ self-assessed language use in five situations was determined with the question ‘Which language do you mainly speak in the following situations?’: at home, at university, with

friends, with fellow students and to your professor. Participants were invited to choose one of three language options: ‘Spanish, ‘English’, and ‘Other namely...’.

Participants’ general language attitudes towards English and Spanish were measured with eight items on seven point Likert scales anchored by totally disagree – totally agree (educated, arrogant, a show-off, intelligent, well-off, snobbish, modern, westernized), introduced by the statements “A person who speaks English (Spanish) fluently is” ( $\alpha = .820$  for English;  $\alpha = .781$  for Spanish; based on Lai 2001, 2005).

## RESULTS

### General language attitudes

A *t* test for independent samples with nationality as factor and general language attitude towards Spanish as dependent variable showed that the Spanish sample ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) had a significantly better attitude towards Spanish than the US Hispanic sample ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ),  $t(222) = 3.88$ ;  $p < .001$ . A *t* test for independent samples with nationality as factor and general language attitude towards English as dependent variable showed that Spanish sample ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) had a significantly better attitude towards English than the US Hispanics ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ )  $t(186.555) = 2.43$ ;  $p = .016$ .

### Attitude towards the advertisement

A repeated measures analysis for attitude towards the advertisement with language of the ad and nationality as between-subjects factors and product as within-subjects factor showed a significant main effect of ad language ( $F(1, 208) = 4.82$ ,  $p = .029$ ,  $\eta^2 = .023$ ). There were no significant main effects of nationality ( $F(1, 208) < 1$ ) and product ( $F(2, 416) = 2.344$ ,  $p = .098$ ), and no significant interaction effects of ad language, nationality and product (all  $p$ 's  $> .060$ ). Pairwise comparison for ad language showed that the Spanish ads ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ) were considered significantly more attractive than the English ads ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ).

### Attitude towards the product

A repeated measures analysis for attitude towards the product with language of the ad and nationality as between-subjects factors and product as within-subjects factor, showed significant main effects of product ( $F(2, 410) = 8.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .038$ ), and nationality ( $F(1, 205) = 7.49$ ,  $p = .007$ ,  $\eta^2 = .035$ ) and no significant main effect of language of the ad ( $F(1, 205) < 1$ ). There was a significant interaction effect between product and nationality ( $F(2, 410) = 4.19$ ,  $p = .016$ ,  $\eta^2 = .020$ ). The other interaction effects were not significant (all  $p$ 's  $> .570$ ). To break down the interaction of product and nationality, a simple effects analysis was conducted. This revealed that US Hispanics (suitcase:  $M = 3.83$   $SD = 1.16$ ; photo camera:  $M = 3.90$   $SD = 1.28$ ) appreciated the suitcase ( $F(1, 216) = 5.92$ ,  $p = .016$ ,  $\eta^2 = .026$ ) and the photo camera ( $F(1, 218) = 13.32$ ,  $p = .003$ ;  $\eta^2 = .039$ ) significantly more than did the Spaniards (suitcase:  $M = 3.45$   $SD = 1.12$ ; photo camera:  $M = 3.40$   $SD = 1.14$ ). There was no significant difference in the appreciation of the adhesive paper note between the two nationalities ( $F(1, 217) < 1$ ).

### Purchase intention

A repeated measures analysis for purchase intention with language of the ad and nationality as between-subjects factors and product as within-subjects factor showed a significant main effect of product ( $F(2, 214) = 17.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .14$ ). There were no significant main effects of nationality ( $F(1, 215) = F < 1$ ), and language of the ad ( $F(1, 215) = F < 1$ ). All interactions were not statistically significant (all  $p$ 's  $> .120$ ). Pairwise comparison for product showed that



purchase intention for the suitcase ( $M = 4.63$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ) was higher than for the photo camera ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ), which in turn was higher than that for the adhesive paper note ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ).

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate to what extent the language attitudes of Spaniards and US Hispanics towards English and Spanish, both in advertising and in general, differ. This was studied through an experiment in which the participants evaluated three equivalent ads that were either in English or Spanish, and through a survey measuring their general language attitude towards speakers of both languages. The main findings showed that general language attitudes of Spaniards towards Spanish and English were more positive than those of US Hispanics. The use of English versus Spanish in the ads they evaluated did not influence the attitudes of the two groups towards the advertisements, attitudes towards the products, and purchase intentions. The background to the study was the idea that differences in sociolinguistic situation would result in different languages attitudes (Lawson and Sachdev, 2004). More specifically, it was expected that US Hispanics and Spaniards would differ in the frequency of their use of English and Spanish and their proficiency in the two languages and consequently in their attitudes towards these two languages. Spaniards were expected to use more Spanish and less English and to have a lower proficiency in English, possibly resulting in more positive attitudes towards Spanish. US Hispanics were expected to use more English and less Spanish, which could possibly result in more positive attitudes towards English, but, since Spanish is their mother tongue as a minority in the US and thus an important part of their identity (cf. Fishman, 1989; Deshpande et al., 1986), it could also be expected that this group has more positive attitudes towards Spanish.

In line with expectations, the US Hispanic participants indicated that they used more English and less Spanish in various situations than did the Spanish participants, and their self-reported English language proficiency was higher and their Spanish language proficiency was lower than that of the Spaniards (cf. Ryan, 2011; US Census, 2011; Eurobarometer, 2012). The Spanish participants were found to have a more positive general attitude towards English than did the US Hispanics. This might be explained by the assumption that the attitudes towards English of US Hispanics, as a minority in a country in which English is the majority language, are less positive than the attitudes of Spaniards towards English as foreign language, which may have more status as a world language (Bhatia, 1992; Gerritsen et al., 2000; Piller, 2003) and be seen as less of a direct threat to their own language and identity. However, the differences in language use and language proficiency did not result in differences between US Hispanics and Spaniards in general attitudes towards Spanish nor in differences in their evaluations of ads with English or Spanish **contradicting the more exposure effect theory**. It seems that in advertising language does not influence the consumer response of these two groups. These findings are in line with earlier studies on the evaluation of ads with English versus Korean for US Korean consumers (Dubish, 2001), and of ads with English versus the native language of consumers in several European countries (Planken et al., 2010, Gerritsen et al. 2007a, 2010), in which language choice was found not to be the relevant factor in consumer response. While language has been found to be a determining factor for group identity (Baldwin-White, 2017), this was not case for ad response in these studies. The absence of language effects may be explained by the fact that, in these studies, participants were all young and highly educated may therefore be more resistant to the persuasion attempt in the ad, neutralizing the role of language in advertising. More research is needed with older and less highly educated groups.


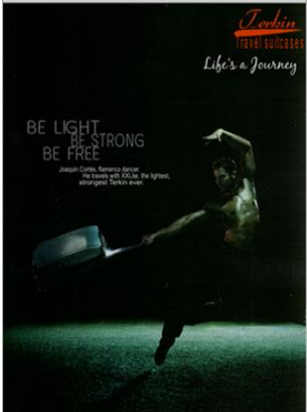
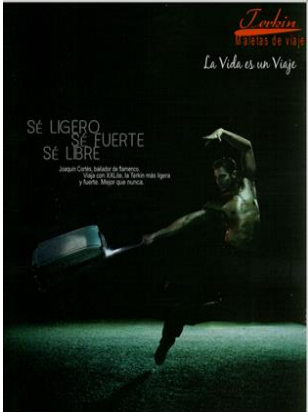
A practical implication of the findings of our study is that they suggest advertisers can approach both US Hispanic and Spanish consumers with one publicity campaign in terms of the choice of English or Spanish in advertisements.

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Figure 1 Stimuli used in the experiment

Product/Language	English	Spanish
1. Adhesive paper note		
2. Suitcase		
3. Photo camera	