Language and economics

Non-linguistic, semiotic and glocal communication: 35 beer labeling cases

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Abstract

Purpose – *This paper aims to explore the country-of-origin effect, specifically its potential impact on beer labeling, from a linguistic perspective.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The paper opted for an exploratory study using Sebba's framework for multilingual texts (2012). Briefly, analysis developed through the observation, the use of notes and comparison.*

Findings – *The paper provides empirical insights on how beer labels appear to signal some interesting occurring trends. First, this investigation seems to suggest a link between languages used and their potential to recall country images that producers may be willing to stimulate and enhance. Second, data appeal to products' countries of origin, using official languages, texts and visual elements strictly interrelated with local cultures.*

Research limitations/implications – *Because of the chosen approach, results may lack generalizability. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to apply this framework or explore the same phenomena in other product categories and geographical markets too. Finally, deeper insights on the topic could be reached taking into consideration other fi data, for example market performance.*

Practical implications – *The paper includes implications for the development of further research regarding brand image and reputation, in general, and the country-of-origin effect, specifically.*

Originality/value – *This project is innovative for two main reasons: first, its methodological approach and, second, its combination of linguistics and marketing-related aspects. Hence, exploring possible links across the two disciplines, ultimately trying to examine potential reasons underlying their use, was the final objective of this paper. Finally, no existing publications appear to use Sebba's framework to analyze beer labels from a linguistic perspective. Consequently, no researchers seem to have explored potential interrelations among this analysis and marketing concepts and strategies.*

Keywords *Beers, Multilingualism, Country-of-origin effect, Glocal, Labels, Sebba's framework*

Paper type *Research paper*

1. Introduction

"Authenticity is a corner stone of contemporary marketing" (Beverland *et al.*, 2008, p. 5). It is "the key ingredient" (Stewart, 2013, p. 60) especially for beers, and for food and beverages (Weiss, 2004), in general.

This work aims to explore these phenomena through the observation of the labels of beers commonly sold in UK supermarket chains. Labels will be collected and compared, with the final goal to identify shared patterns and major differences among them. Drawing on Sebba's (2012) framework, special attention will be paid to the languages used on these labels.

Briefly, this paper will try to identify which main trends can be observed for labels of foreign beers ordinarily distributed in the country and to formulate hypotheses that could explain the predilection for certain languages on specific products.

2. Literature review

Research shows the crucial role that the country-of-origin effect can play in determining purchase decisions, given its powerful influence on quality perceptions and evaluations (Hastak and Hong, 1991), particularly regarding beers (Madichie, 2011). This transpires both from packaging, in general (MarketLine, 2010), and from labels, specifically (Beverland *et al.*, 2008). Hence, being able to communicate the 'nationality' of goods can often be beneficial for their producers.

In this respect, languages could be used to convey this piece of information. Given their deep ideological connection with countries and their related images (Anholt, 2003), they can eventually evoke positive associations and reinforce brands' image and reputation, "turning these languages into commodified tools of communication" (Dior, 2004, p. 98), representing a 'sign of authenticity' (Coupland, 2003). Following this trend, "older nation-state ideologies of language, identity, and culture are appropriated and mobilized in commodification of authenticity" (Heller, 2010, pp. 104-105).

In this sense, product labels have the potential to establish a powerful flow of communication with consumers which can translate into a considerable competitive advantage for companies. In fact, "one of the surest ways we locate ourselves [. . .] is through the signs we see here and there about us in city streets [. . .] and labelling consumer products" (Scollon and Scollon, 2003, p. 116). Moreover, "a code may be chosen because it indexes the point in the world where it is placed or because it symbolizes a social group because of certain associations with that group" (Scollon and Scollon, 2003, p. 119).

Several studies, conducted within the field of both marketing and linguistics, have shown how deeply the country-of-origin effect can impact consumers' choices (Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2001), especially if motivated by local know-how, universally recognized (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 1993). Indeed, researchers stated that the country of origin has enough potential to be even considered as a separate attribute in the overall product evaluation (Johannson *et al.*, 1985).

Given their capacity to improve consumers' opinions about goods and the multiple

benefits that could derive from this, the impact of 'made in' labels has been widely

examined (Lee et al., 2005). Especially for beers, the country-of-origin effect (Madichie,

2011) can be enhanced through packaging (MarketLine, 2010, p. 10) and labels

(Allison and Uhl, 1964).

This project's development has been undeniably influenced by research and approaches to multimodality (Kress and Van Leuween, 2006). Moreover, Sebba's (2012) framework has been adopted to analyze the materials collected. Furthermore, Pennycook's (1994) framework and research conducted by numerous experts, including Canagarajah (2002), Lee and Norton (2009), Cook (1988) and Day (1985), have also contributed to comprehend the position that English language occupies in the global market in recent times.

To summarize, the concept of global branding has been explored through various authors and points of view to integrate this research. In particular, the notion of intangible brand value that "marketing adds to products [and] allows producers and sellers to charge more money for their products and services" (Anholt, 2003, pp. 1-2), serving as "a multiplier of value" (Anholt, 2003, p. 2), profoundly impacts this study. The close interdependence between value and producers' reputation is also a central concept for this project. Specifically, one of the pillars on which this work is foregrounded is that "all consumers, without even realizing it, see other countries according to an unspoken but nonetheless very real

hierarchy" (Anholt, 2003, p. 79). This implies that "imported brands are [. . .] ranked in the consumers' minds, to some extent, according to where the consumer believes they come from" (Anholt, 2003, p. 79).

3. Methods

Sebba's (2012) framework for multilingual texts has been adopted to analyze collected labels and has proven useful to examine multimodal texts, such as labels. As its creator points out, previous frameworks, such as the Markedness Model (Myers-Scotton, 1993) and the Conversational Analysis model proposed by Auer (1998) and Wei (2005), can help in examining multilingual conversations, although this cannot be assured for texts, especially, given their lack of mutual exchange among participants.

As such, this framework represents a valid alternative "for a rich analysis of a wide range of multilingual texts, including such texts as bilingual signs and multilingual labels" (Sebba, 2012, p. 114). Accordingly, "at least three types of units" (Sebba, 2012, p. 106) can be identified while analyzing multimodal written texts:

1. grammatical units;
2. genre-specific units; and
3. visual/spatial units.

Specifically, the model proposes an approach founded on two main elements:

1. the relationship between language and content of the text; and
2. the type of language mixing adopted.

3.1 Language–content relationships

According to the model, language–content relationships within texts can be subdivided into three main categories:

1. equivalent texts;
2. overlapping language content; and
3. disjoint texts.

Equivalent texts are translations expressing exactly the same content in different languages. Disjoint texts indicate two distinctive contents in different codes, while overlapping contents are constituted by a mix of the other two types.

3.2 Language mixing type

The model pinpoints at least three possibilities:

1. mixed units;
2. language-neutral units; and
3. monolingual units.

The fi group has units with elements from two or more languages that may be of different types. Conversely, language-neutral units are those that "cannot be assigned exclusively to one language, but they belong equally to both or all the languages involved in the texts" (Sebba, 2012, p. 108). "These tend to be smaller units, such as words or headings or brand names" (Sebba, 2012). Referring to labels, they "can also be an interesting example of several languages in the minimum amount of space" (Sebba, 2012). Among the data collected, a few instances can be included in the second group mentioned, mostly brand names, while the greatest majority of the materials analyzed consists of mixed units.

3.3 Multilingual texts

Two main distinctions can be operated among multilingual texts:

1. parallel texts; and

2. complementary texts (Sebba, 2012).

Texts pertaining to the first type are, usually, symmetrical and semantically equivalent and their mixing type is exclusively monolingual. They classically consist of "measured units, systematically arranged and expressing identical content in each language, without any language mixing" (Sebba, 2012, p. 108). These characteristics:

> Can serve a sociolinguistic function: their symmetrical arrangement is a visual metaphor for equality, their content equivalence is a response to assumed monolingualism or a preference for literacy in one of the languages only, while the absence of mixing is a response to a pervasive language ideology of monolingualism and purism and a preference for standard forms (Sebba, 2012, p. 109).

Conversely, complementary texts can be acknowledged "as having asymmetrical language-spatial relationships and disjoint language-content relationships" (Sebba, 2012, p. 108). They are meant to target "people who can read or that are in the catchment area in both languages" (ibidem). Finally, "intermediate types certainly exist, but the framework allows analysts to specify how they differ from typical cases" (ibidem).

From the analysis conducted, the majority of the texts located on front labels can be classified as parallel, while labels on the back of the packaging are generally complementary texts, as they are always positioned in a well-defined order, where one of the languages occupies the "preferred/privileged upper position" (Scollon and Scollon, 2003, p. 124).

Considering all this, the present work aims to analyze data, applying Sebba's framework, to determine the relationship between language and content within the text and the adopted type of language mixing. This may help in classifying the multilingual texts collected, ultimately providing deeper insights on potential connections between languages present on those labels and possible strategies can influence languages on their products' labels.

3.4 Data collection

Data have been selected among beer brands which are not identified as from the UK. Similarly, none of the brands is from another English-speaking country either, as it would have been impossible to determine if English was used as lingua franca or as 'commodity' to appeal to the products' origin, aiming to enhance the country-of-origin effect among consumers.

To conclude, the 35 brands considered are distributed at five supermarket chains in the UK: Asda, Aldi, Sainsbury's, Spar and Tesco, and identify themselves, on their respective Web sites, as from 17 different countries.

3.5 Data analysis

Data have been collected taking notes r e g a r d i n g the labels in the front and back of the packaging, whenever present. Precisely, beers are, for the majority, contained in glass bottles. Meanwhile, a few of the samples examined are canned. In the former cases, labels are made of paper and glued to the bottles, while in the latter, labels are printed directly on the aluminum constituting the products' packaging. Given the goals and characteristics of this research, these materials will be considered as equivalent. Information retrieved can be summarized as in Table I.

Two main elements are taken into consideration in this study:

1. front label; and

2. back label.

Table I	Beer labels collected		
Brand	Country of origin	Front label	Back/Side label
Duvel	Belgium	French, English	Many languages
Hoegaarden	Belgium	Dutch, French, English	Many languages
Leffe	Belgium	English, Dutch, French, German	Many languages
Sainte Etienne	Belgium	English	English
Stella Artois	Belgium	English, French	English
Brahama	Brazil	many languages	No label
Tsingtao	China	Chinese, English, French, Spanish	Chinese, English
Pilsner Urquell	Czech Republic	English	English
Staropramen	Czech Republic	English	English
Vratislav	Czech Republic	English	English
Brasserie	France	English, French	No label
Kronenbourg	France	French	English
Lowestein	France	English, German	English
Beck's	Germany	German, English	English
Bitburger	Germany	German, English	Many languages
Franziskaner	Germany	German German	Many languages
Erdinger	Germany	English	Many languages
Steinhäuser	Germany	German, English	English
Weihenstephan	Germany	Many languages	English
Mythos	Greece	English	Many languages
Bavaria	Holland	English, French	Many languages
Heineken	Holland	English, Hindi	English
Cobra	India	Italian, English	Many languages
Moretti	Italy	Italian	Many languages
Peroni	Italy	English, Japanese	Italian, English
Asahi	Japan	Many languages	English
Amigos	Mexico	Many languages	English
Corona	Mexico	Spanish, English	English
Sol	Mexico	English	Spanish, English
Baltika	Russia	English	English
Tiger	Singapore	Spanish	English
Estrella	Spain	Spanish	Many languages
San Miguel	Spain	Spanish, English	No label
Cusqueña	Peru	English	English
Singha	Thailand		English (+ origins in Thai)

Note: $n = 35$

Languages used on front and back labels are examined in comparison with the available evidence on origins. However, not all samples possess both these elements. Furthermore, the expression "many languages", used in the table, refers to standardized labels reporting facts translated in many different languages. These do not change depending on the country of origin of the product or its destination market. Instead, this type of label usually lists products' ingredients.

Applying Sebba's model, results appear as in Table II.

As noticeable, the majority of labels scrutinized are monolingual. Conversely, multilingual labels are characterized by disjoint or overlapping texts on the front of the packaging, while equivalent texts are predominantly on back labels. Examples of equivalent texts are Leffe's and Mythos' front label, but also the ones on the back side of Erdinger and Hoegaarden bottles.

Precisely, disjoint texts are present on front labels, for instance, on Beck's and Heineken's. According to the sample of beers collected, it appears less common for their labels to be in more than one language. Whenever this occurs, the two languages do not usually communicate the same message, but are frequently mixed or carry two different meanings. This may suggest that targeted readers are either proficient in them all or are interested in diverse aspects. If this was not the case, sections would instead convey the same piece of information to all consumers. Accordingly, parts of labels in different languages appear to

Table II	Language–content relationships analyzed through Sebba's framework		
Brand	Country of origin	Front label	Back label
Duvel	Belgium	Overlapping texts	Equivalent texts
Hoegaarden	Belgium	Overlapping texts	Equivalent texts
Leffe	Belgium	Equivalent texts (+ origins in Dutch)	Overlapping texts
Sainte Etienne	Belgium	Monolingual	Monolingual
Stella Artois	Belgium	Overlapping texts	Monolingual
Brahama	Brazil	Overlapping texts	Equivalent texts
Tsingtao	China	Overlapping texts	Overlapping texts
Pilsner Urquell	Czech Republic	Monolingual	Monolingual
Staropramen	Czech Republic	Monolingual	Monolingual
Vratislav	Czech Republic	Monolingual	Monolingual
Brasserie	France	Disjoint texts	No label
Kronenbourg	France	Monolingual	Monolingual
Lowestein	France	Disjoint texts	Monolingual
Beck's	Germany	Disjoint texts	Monolingual
Bitburger	Germany	Disjoint texts	Equivalent texts
Franziskaner	Germany	Overlapping texts	Equivalent texts
Erdinger	Germany	Monolingual	Equivalent texts
Steinhäuser	Germany	Monolingual	Monolingual
Weihenstephan	Germany	Overlapping texts	Monolingual
Mythos	Greece	Equivalent texts	Equivalent texts
Bavaria	Holland	Monolingual	Equivalent texts
Heineken	Holland	Disjoint texts	Monolingual
Cobra	India	Disjoint texts	Equivalent texts
Moretti	Italy	Overlapping texts	Overlapping texts
Peroni	Italy	Monolingual	Overlapping texts
Asahi	Japan	Overlapping texts	Monolingual
Amigos	Mexico	Overlapping texts	Monolingual
Corona	Mexico	Overlapping texts	Monolingual
Sol	Mexico	Disjoint texts	Overlapping texts
Baltika	Russia	Monolingual	Monolingual
Tiger	Singapore	Monolingual	Monolingual
Estrella	Spain	Monolingual	Equivalent texts
San Miguel	Spain	Monolingual	No label
Cusqueña	Peru	Disjoint texts	Monolingual
Singha	Thailand	Monolingual	Monolingual + origins in Thai

Note: $n = 35$

be complementary, as they enrich each other's content. Also, it seems that each of these sections differs depending on its function.

Moreover, both the Italian brands and the Chinese one explicitly refer to authenticity. Indeed, Moretti mentions "quality and tradition", and Nastro Azzurro remarks to use the "authentic Italian recipe", being the "Italian beer number 1" and having an "unmistakable Italian style". Similarly, "青岛" are the characters for "Qingdao", the city where this beer is produced. Also, the Chinese character "青, qīng" could indicate blue, green or black and

is usually used to describe the chromatic shades of the sea or the shiny hair of Chinese women under a particular light. These characters, therefore, deeply connect with local culture and society.

Summarizing, the labels allude to authenticity, in diverse ways. Several among them do this by using a language other than English, by referring to the process required to brew those beers, by publishing the date when their recipe was established or by explicitly referring to specific ingredients or product peculiarities. Combinations of these possibilities also happen. Kronenbourg, for instance, reports both the year and its "unique aroma from Alsace". Also, Asahi's back label refers to the "Rising Sun" while explaining its brand name and claims to be "brewed to an authentic Japanese recipe using only the finest natural ingredients".

4. Results

Front labels gathered can be subdivided into four categories, according to the languages they are written in:

1. labels in the language of the country of origin of the product;

2. labels in the local language, accompanied by English;

3. labels in English only; and

4. standardized labels in many languages.

Conversely, texts collected may be classified into three main subcategories, depending on the characteristics of labels located on the back side of the packaging:

1. labels in the original language and in English;

2. labels in English only; and

3. standardized labels in several languages.

After examining collected data, it may be stated that no rule can be formulated to determine which language/s will be on any beer's label. This may happen because companies have their own interpretations of many aspects, including the performance of the markets they are competing in, of local consumers' ideal products, quality perceptions, expectations, needs and desires. In view of that, recently released data appear to confirm such a trend. In 2012, for example, Italy was the major exporter of beer in the UK, right after Ireland, respectively, realizing 17.17 per cent and 30.82 per cent of the sales in this geographic area (Euromonitor International, 2014). Perhaps because of the aforementioned consumer preference, both of the producers in this study presented their products with a front label partially in the original language, as for Moretti. Similarly, Peroni showed a label entirely in Italian on the front of the bottle, i.e. the most visible side of the packaging on supermarket shelves. In fact, English was only on the back label in this latter case, used to list ingredients and other essential information about the drink, while Italian was, once again, used to discuss the traditional recipe according to which the beer had been brewed.

Nonetheless, organizations develop their unique business model, marketing mix, corporation strategies, performance objectives and values. At the same time, they also decide how they aim to communicate them to the public. These are only a few of the various aspects and decisions that can potentially impact labeling choices. Probably, variables are numerous and so complex that it is not possible to define universal strategies. In spite of that, some common traits may be noticed in many of the products examined.

For instance, brand equity looks like to partially determine which language/s to put on the label, as well as the perceived added value from the country of origin. Accordingly, collected data appear to suggest that labels, especially the language/s on them, follow the individual marketing strategy of each brand. As such, the presence of English only could be linked to the willingness of the producer "to convey a cosmopolitan air rather than to attract an audience proficient in English" (Huebner, 2006, p. 41). Additionally, English is the official language in the UK, thus the one local consumers are proficient in. Although, it is also widespread in the world, hence it can allow its speakers to communicate with foreigners too (Smalley, 1994), if used as a lingua franca.

It has to be noticed, though, that this claim appears to contradict recent trends taking place within the beer market, where "imports also declined in 2012 by 4 per cent in volume terms, in spite of growing consumer interest in more premium beers such as world beers with a strong tradition" (Euromonitor International, 2014, p. 2). To support this reading of phenomena developing nowadays, nevertheless, some of the examined brands use a localized equity through the name and other linguistic references. For example, the Mexican beer Sol, whose brand name means 'sun' in Spanish, presents its original language both in the front and back of the bottle, although accompanied by English. To

confirm how controversial the situation appears, both of the analyzed beers from Holland showed English on their front label and a multilingual standardized label on their back. In spite of their apparently 'international appeal' transmitted through English, they belong to the third most sold national group among beers imported in 2012. In fact, the total of almost 137 million of liters sold in the UK that year represents slightly more than 15 per cent of the sales realized over that period, a little less than Italy, ranked second and approximately half of the quantity coming from Ireland, first classified (Euromonitor International, 2014, p. 11).

Concluding, through the collected labels, it can be observed that the language/s of the products' countries of origin, whenever present, are located on the front label in the greatest majority of the cases. These are either the only ones on the labels or are accompanied by English. Finally, allusions to the foreign countries are always noticeable on the labels examined, either adopting their language/s, like Peroni and Tsingtao, or referring to local cultures and traditions in English, as for Asahi and Amigos.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, analyzed labels might signal various interesting trends. First, "products with lateral links to the popular image of their countries of origin might gain extra stand out and brand equity as a result" (Anholt, 2003, p. 80), as data regarding imports of Italian beer and the two Italian brands examined appear to show.

Second, "Countries, cities, and regions behave in many ways just like brands. Indeed, they are perceived [. . .] in certain ways by large groups of people at home and abroad, being associated with certain qualities and characteristics" (Anholt, 2003, p. 109). Although this work does not deepen this aspect, it refers to it as one of the possible reasons that might motivate companies to use certain languages instead of others on their products' labels, even if those are not likely to be known in the destination market such as, for instance, the city where Tsingtao beer is produced.

Third, "commercial brands are increasingly performing the role of transmitting national culture" (Anholt, 2003, p. 138). Moreover, "branded products might profit from talking about their national identity to consumers" (Anholt, 2003, p. 138). Based on the analysis conducted, both these concepts seem to be relevant. Indeed, labels examined appeal to products' countries of origin, using their official languages, texts and visual elements strictly interrelated with local cultures. These findings might demonstrate the willingness of producers to express their beers' origins, as these can possibly be potential sources of competitive advantage and consumer preference, as previously explained. In this sense, either monolingual or multilingual labels may be exploited to reach these objectives, depending on the situation. For example, just one among the three French brands analyzed has its front label only in French, another is bilingual (in French and English) and the last one is exclusively in English. Nevertheless, their origins are noticeable on them all, either through their language or their 'made-in' specification. In view of the 11.11 per cent of sales realized by French beers in the country, the fourth most sold in the market, data seem to support the conclusion that explicating this brand nationality may be beneficial for companies (Euromonitor International, 2014).

Additionally, "language, the primary means of communicating culture, is an important ambassador of culture outside the home country" (Anholt, 2003, p. 144). Several labels appear to suggest this, as they are written in languages that are neither official nor commonly spoken or known in the UK, such as German, Dutch, French, Italian and many more. Hence, labels appear to be monolingual or multilingual depending on the image that the company is willing to communicate to consumers.

Finally, by analyzing labels using Sebba's framework, it has been possible to observe that the majority of the collected data are monolingual. Multilingual labels typically show disjoint or overlapping texts on the front of the packaging, while equivalent texts are more frequent on back labels. As stated, it is impossible to determine a unique rule for all brands, given

the complexity of the factors impacting in labeling decisions, although common patterns may be worth noticing.

It has to be mentioned, though, that this project presents limitations. First of all, it considers only one product category, beer, and one market, the UK. Therefore, further research developments could focus on different national markets and, eventually, on other product categories, for example wine, keeping in consideration differences in terms of targeted consumers, including their diverse needs, wants and ideal products. At a first glance, brands within this other product category appear to behave quite differently in terms of labeling characteristics. For instance, wines often have their origins specified on their front label, but rarely explicated through the use of local languages. In fact, whenever these are present, they are usually accompanied by English. Moreover, these indications of origin are frequently located in a central position within the front label, thus giving them absolute prominence. Conversely, made-in labels are not commonly visible on beers, as they are frequently situated on the side.

As a final point, other market performance indicators might provide deeper insights on the challenging competitive conditions that companies have to take into account and face if selling their products in the UK. Also, interdependences between brand popularity and languages on their labels look worth exploring further. Perhaps, the country-of-origin effect may be a valuable tool to promote beers detaining a considerable market share.

Concluding, findings suggest that beer labels in the UK do not always communicate linguistically to consumers, as they are sometimes written in a language other than English. This implies that labels can be conceived and evaluated not just as an informative linguistic medium. Indeed, there may be several semiotic implications involved and playing a relevant role within purchase decision processes. Finally, labels both in English and in their brands' 'original languages' seem to signal a closer orientation toward a glocal approach. Those labels, in fact, may express these companies' willingness to communicate with local consumers in their own language, yet keeping their 'native language' too.

Summarizing, the sample analyzed in this work appears to show how producers can pay attention to brand and consumers' identity, choosing to be both responsive to local characteristics and universally recognizable as from a given country. As a result, the former capability might determine a beneficial country-of-origin effect, while the latter may translate into added value for the public and, consequently, into more positive product evaluations. In this sense, languages often seem to be a pure commodity. As such, these could be deprived of their capacity to communicate messages that can be perceived, decoded and, potentially, interpreted correctly by their targeted receivers. Thus, non-linguistic communication seems to be intrinsically capable of conveying ideas that could be used for promotional purposes, too. In this respect, this aspect and other possible applications of this relatively new framework represent interesting opportunities both to expand the present project and to motivate additional contributions to research.

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Further reading

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