Chapter 11
Multilingualism as International Marketing Strategy: A Linguistic Study of Product Packaging in Nigeria

Floribert Patrick C. Endong
University of Calabar, Nigeria

Grace Eugenie Ndobo Essoh
University of Calabar, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Market globalization has made multilingual marketing communications a sine qua non for most transnational businesses. Exploring new foreign markets has thus meant translating and localizing marketing communications, so as to enable foreign consumers to have the kind of experience that may spur them into being favorable to the products or services on promotion. Conscious of this imperative, many Nigerian companies have embarked on multilingual packaging as a key component of their international marketing strategies. Although such a language-based tactic has enormous potential, Nigerian companies’ use of multilingual packaging is confronted to a multitude of problems. This chapter explores four of such problems, including mis-translations (of packages), partial translation, typographic and design errors, and companies’ adherence to the myth stating that English is the language of business. To address these challenges, the chapter recommends non or reduced reliance on automatic translation and resorting to the services of a professional translator, “transcreators,” and experienced marketers.

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INTRODUCTION

The advent of market globalization has motivated most companies across the globe to rethink many of their production and business strategies. This phenomenon has actually given birth to a synergistic term “marketing globalization”, which has encouraged businesses to more and more struggle to be stateless and to thus extend their tentacles to foreign countries and markets. In this crave for the trans-nationalization or globalization of their influences and markets, business enterprises have been compelled to design innovative and revolutionizing strategies to promote and sell their products and services. Besides recalibrating their production machineries so as to offer products and services that are globally standard, advanced, reliable, functional and low in price, most companies have embraced multilingualism (multilingual advertising communications) as a serious international marketing strategy. A 2015 study carried out by the Web Globalization Report Card on digital marketing, has, for instance, revealed that, the number of languages supported by websites conceived by most of the leading global businesses to market their brands has doubled to nearly 30 languages from 2005 to 2015 (cited in Yunker 2015). This number includes only leading global companies, meaning that the vast majority of cooperate websites support at least 10 languages.

Nigerian companies have not been exempted from this remarkable international marketing trend. Over the years, many of them have increasingly resorted to multilingual marketing communications, visibly aimed at foreign markets in both the CEMAC and ECOWAS sub-regions (in Africa); sub-regions which are dominantly Francophone and Arabophone, with little presence of Spanish and Portuguese speaking communities. Multilingualism in Nigerian companies’ approaches to international marketing could be seen in the fact, today, it has become trendy for most of them to rely on, and conceive bilingual or multilingual product packages to market their products in foreign climes. From pharmaceutical through cosmetic to food and beverage industries, most Nigerian companies now make it a business imperative to translate the packages of their products into a wide number of foreign languages notably French, Arabic, Portuguese and Spanish; this, visibly in view of targeting newer markets in various African sub-regions. Although it is hoped and documented that such a marketing tactic has been yielding a considerable number of dividends, many issues in Nigeria-based companies’ use of multilingual communications are to be deplored. In effect, many of these issues have the potential to seriously reduce the effectiveness of their marketing campaigns or of totally marring them.

This chapter sets out to explore some of these problematic issues. Based on critical observation and a review of secondary sources, the chapter specifically seeks to answer three research questions: how can multilingualism facilitate international marketing and make it more fruitful? How have multilingual marketing communications been used by Nigerian companies and what are some of the challenges faced by these companies in the process of using such linguistic tools? To answer these questions, the present chapter is divided into four main parts. The first part provides a theoretical framework (the social innovation theory) showing how relevant it is for the study. The second part examines multilingualism as a revolutionizing international marketing strategy. The third part critically explores the practice of multilingual package labeling among Nigerian companies while the last part examines a number of challenges encountered by Nigerian companies in their use of multilingual marketing communications.