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From Vernacular Roots to Global Appeal: The Evolution of Advertising Language in India

Dr. P. Sasi Ratnakar¹, Prof. Sharada Allamneni²

¹Associate Professor, Vignan's Foundation for Science Technology and Research
Vadlamudi, Andhra Pradesh, India
Email: drsasirkp@gmail.com

²Department of English and Other Indian & Foreign Languages, School of Applied Sciences
& Humanities, Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology and Research,
(Deemed-to-be University), Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India.
E Mail: allamnenisharada@gmail.com

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Abstract

Adopting a comparative approach, this paper explores the evolution of advertising language in India. The paper will attempt to trace the changing approach of Indian media from late eighteenth century to our contemporary times to highlight the enduring importance of language as a core element of successful advertising. By delving into the linguistic choices made by different advertisers, our analysis will focus on factors that influence these language selections, the intended impact on target audience, and the logic behind the growing preference for English in Indian advertisements notwithstanding the nation's multilingual landscape. Citing ample illustrations, the paper will analyse how the advertisers/agencies' make strategic use of figurative language (e.g., metaphors, similes) as a persuasive tool to influence consumer behaviour. The paper will thus endeavour to contribute a deeper understanding on the evolving dynamics of advertising language in the Indian context.

Key words: Advertising language, evolution, historical vs. contemporary, India, linguistic choice, figurative language.

The Earth has its resources diversified and dispersed. This is one reason why the general survival of humanity demands diversified skills and makes every entity rely on its counterpart for its sustenance and progress. This dependence increased with commoditization leading to economic activities like production, buying and selling. Bypassing the intriguing question about the priority of buying or selling, we know that we buy or sell as long as we 'need' and 'want'. When the buyer matured in shrewdness to get the best and cheapest among many options, the seller had to woo the buyer towards his product. Stiff competition made the manufacturer to showcase his product in the best way possible, projecting its utility and uniqueness with catchy words and interesting captions. Once this

exercise, what is called 'advertising' became an indispensable factor, it raised the curtains of the glittery world of ad - making. While initially pictures, signs and drawings conveyed the intended message, gradually language became decisive for a greater effect. Although iconic symbols are part of advertising, Barthes in his essay "Rhetoric of the Image" preferred the linguistic message for its 'anchorage' i.e. the determination of the selection of the intended message:

all images are polysemous...(which) poses a question of meaning and this question always comes through as a dysfunction even this dysfunction is recuperated by the society as a tragic...or a poetic game... (the caption) helps me to choose the correct level of perception, permits me to focus not simply my gaze but also my understanding (38-9).

When compared to the modern posters which are forceful, the earlier ones were devoid of any strong persuasion towards the product showcased. For instance, an advertisement appeared in the Bombay Courier, issue number 51, dated 5th September 1793, through which public were informed about some items for sale. The ad reads like this:

ADVERTISEMENT

JUST EXPOSED TO SALE

FOR READY MONEY

AT THE SHOP OF

CHARLES FEATLY

Gold and Silver Smith

IN THE BAZAR

A Valuable Assortment of Ladies' and Gentlemen's Jewellery, musical and plain eight day Table Clocks, Gold, Silver and Gilt capped and jeweled horizontal and plain stop Watches, Gold Watch Chains, Seals, Keys, Trinketts, Silver plate; a complete Electrifying Machine and Azimuth Compasses, together with a Collection of very valuable large PAINTINGS and PICTURES and divers with other curious, ornamental and serviceable articles. (Source: *Indian Advertising 1780 to 1950 A.D* by Arun Choudari)

In the above advertisement, one notices a very plain description of articles for sale and no proactive effort on the part of the seller to capture the buyers. The seller doesn't use any words other than 'valuable', 'ornamental', 'serviceable' and 'curious' to qualify his or her items. The announcement plainly describes the list of items sold at a particular place and doesn't sport any jugglery of words and influential captions. An ad poster of early times was comparatively plain that it just conveyed the information. Such simplicity made Samuel Johnson write in 1759 that ads were "very negligently perused, and it is therefore necessary to gain attention by magnificence of promise and by eloquence, sometimes sublime, sometimes pathetick". (Idler, issue 40, 20 January). By 1760, Johnson was content on the appeal value of ads when he said "the trade of advertising is now so near to perfection that it is not easy to propose any improvements". Gradually, a precise appreciation of customer's preferences, sentiments and expectations in choosing a product and thus magic of language became instrumental for the desirable effect.

We find several writings on the importance of language and English in advertising. *Advertising Language: A Pragmatic Approach to Advertisements in Britain and Japan* (1999) by Keiko Tanaka discusses the figurative application of language with puns and metaphors for the desired effect on the consumers. Lars Hermeren in *English for sale: a study of the language of advertising* (1999) studies English with reference to the various types of advertisements. *The Language of Advertising: Written Text* (2002) by Angela Goddard discusses the aspects of language, image and layout and the way they are inter complementary in making the advertising language. Christopher E. Gittings, Sean Brierley's *The Handbook of Advertising* (2002) mentions the application of language and rhetoric in the world of

advertising. Sylva-Michèle Sternkopf in *English in Marketing* (2005) observes the aspects of international communication and English as the lingua franca and also makes a linguistic and semiotic analysis of advertising. In *Sold on Language* (2011), language scientists Julie Sedivy and Greg Carlson reveal the expressions of commercial and political advertisers in a competition driven scenario and how the minimal linguistic space is utilized to capture the target audience.

A relation of need and availability between the buyer and brand is emotionalized by selection of appropriate linguistic expression and its contextualization after a sensible assessment of its impact on the target. Cultural and linguistic diversity in India demanded an intelligent discretion from the ad makers in terms of appropriateness of language i.e. whether English or regional. With the increasing number of English speaking and understanding population, several business announcements are appearing in English. In multi-lingual and multi-cultural entities like India, the choice of language must be a very sensitive issue for the ad makers and a careful assessment of many factors has to be made before deciding the language in which the ad should be released. Indian press, both English dailies and vernacular have a wide span of public connectivity and daily carry hundreds of ads to millions of people. In spite of having very strong regional and vernacular preferences, Indian advertisers, as observed by C.L. Tyagi Arun Kumar, in his *Advertising Management* display a very curious choice of language for their advertisements:

Advertisement rates of language papers are generally lower than those of the English press, even when the former command higher circulation. The editor of a Hindi daily said that Indian advertisers were highly English oriented. Except from the public sector undertakings, language papers do not get advertisements about heavy machinery and capital goods. Among the world airlines, only Air India releases its advertisements to these papers (399).

Barring the interiors of rural India, English in India has its own appeal. Although favoritism towards English is mocked as our colonial fixation to that language, and demands from some native corners in favor of *rastrabhasha*, the English language's pervasiveness in the sub-continent reflect in the ads meant to appeal to the educated Indians. A top executive of a leading advertising agency conceded that advertisers are pro-anglican. It is not a remnant of alien rule, he says advertising in English, particularly through press media, had a better image in public, "English newspapers exercise a greater influence on consumption than their counterparts do, especially in respect of luxury products." (Tyagi 399). It cannot be ignored that a product whose ad is drafted in English has a serious image attached to it.

William A. Hachten, James F. Scotton say that in India,

A great plus is that educated class speak English – a link language that connects Indians from different regions and different mother tongues. English is a major asset as well for India's role in new world of digital communication. These speakers support over two dozen major media including the great dailies inherited from the British Raj such as the Times of India, The Statesman, the Hindu and The Tribune. The habit of using media significant number of educated, urban Indians is similar to that of their counter parts in Europe and North America (159, 161).

Glocalisation thrust forward the need for an international lingua franca with its obvious indication towards English language. English, as a survival language eroded the prior existing ignorance of the language. English medium of instruction became swift during the past two decades which broadened Indian perspectives. This enhanced the percolation of English through newspaper and television ads increasing the receptivity of people towards English ads. The advent of English satellite channels with movies, soap operas and sports have opened the thresholds of even rural India to welcome this language. Even rural India has a fascination for this language which makes them understand the ads with curiosity in spite of their unfamiliarity with the language. In *Advertising in*

Developing and Emerging Countries, The dynamics and Entrepreneurship of advertising in India, Bhatia and Mukesh speak about the absorption of English by rural India:

Consider, for example the expressions “NO 1”, “new” or “Super”. Before the onset of globalization, the concept of being best was the expressed means of a native expression, *avval darza* (excellent/first class) but, today, it is completely replaced either by No.1 or the expression *nambar* (number) *ek* (one) (or by the numeral substitution) even in rural advertising in India. Information about size and models is usually presented in English, although such size and model are written in Devanagari script and demonstrate that long string of juxtapositioning of nouns is an example of overt global advertising discourse through English (151).

The technique of making the language achieve its result lies in the choice of words and arranging them in a way to evoke greater response. This effort consummates with the choice of language with the target group. This is evident when the children studying in convent schools are captured mostly by ads in English for they spend most of their time in English medium schools where English language prevails. Many of the Indian parents identifying their children with the young artists in English driven ads accord an unpronounced welcome to the choice of English language. A modern educated Indian housewife who makes the major decision in purchasing the provisions for household is now appealed in English medium ads.

The use of English in ads is primarily influenced by product and target viewers. It is frequently noticed that the product, when qualified as a result of latest technological or commercial developments, the ad happens to be in English. For example, manufacturers of computers, bikes, foot wear, soft drinks, deodorants, educational products, and services like banks, defense, IT, airways, tourism and finance use English in their advertisements. As mentioned earlier, though Indian Airways uses Hindi in its ads, and some banks also did so (like Andhra Bank which makes its ads in vernacular) the product's modernity makes the ad makers to ‘keep it psychologically relevant’ to the ‘pro modern users’ by floating it in English. It will be cogent to argue that English language is effectual to create the aura of modernity induced sophistication around these products. Besides, the terminology when translated could create linguistic and cognitive gaps when modern products like I.T., automobiles etc, because native language wouldn't have an exact equivalent. The viewers or audience are not linguistically nurtured to grasp such formal expressions in vernacular language owing to English medium of instruction. For example, the phrase ‘authorized dealer’ in an ad becomes ‘*adhikrutha* dealer’ when translated into Telugu, where the latter could be an unfamiliar word even to many educated persons (unless they make an intelligent guess of the meaning by connecting mentally and aurally to its equivalent in English). Understanding such expressions needs contextual appreciation which dilutes the impact factor or at times and could result in improper understanding of an expression. Even if linguistic conservatives manage to synthesize the terminology or nomenclature, what if it suffers handicaps in appeal to the viewer? Moreover, there is no reason for the profit oriented companies that are cross national and cross cultural in their perspective to be particular about using a regional language unless such choice mars the intended effect. The nationalized and private banks though design their ads in regional languages, also do care to generously daub the ad with English to have an extended effect on multitude. For example, Axis Bank's Dil se open door series of advertisements. A conception to attribute foreignness in abstraction to modern products is by equating anything modern to non-indigenous. The mixture English with regional vernacular in ads in other traditional, relatively closed non-English speaking societies like Japan has its own logic built around. Bhatia and William in their book *The Handbook of Bilingualism* says, “It appears that advertisers worldwide either consciously or unconsciously favor bilingualism over monolingualism. This is true of their promotion of local as well as global products” (542).

And even when this bilingualism effects the intelligibility of the ad, there is persistent tendency to maintain bilingualism. They further say:

though English might not be intelligible in some instances, the loss of propositional meaning is not a total loss. It is compensated for the attention getting function that lack of intelligibility serves in Japan. This is the predominant trend in Japan – to use English for what we call “cosmetic” reasons, i.e. as an attention-getting device. This adds yet another dimension to the pattern of global bilingualism and English is often considered a “cool” language to attract attention (Bhatia and William 542). The extreme familiarity of vernacular could dilute the novel image of the products which newly came up in market as the fruits of globalization.

The Product-Place-Target viewer-Appeal-Impact is also a rational equation where ad makers make a choice of the medium. We notice that televisions, newspapers, magazines, and internet apart from wall posters and hoardings are majorly noticed by public. The age factor of the people who attend these avenues is also crucial for the choice of language. An advertisement may find its way into a vernacular newspaper in any language for a universal appeal, a few times in both languages on T.V but always in English on the Internet. This is based on the assumption that majority of users of Internet have the knowledge of English. Thus the place where the ads are posted depends upon the user’s familiarity with the language. Internet is worldwide and English being the lingua Franca automatically brings ads in English.

The customer base and age of the target viewer is crucial in selecting the choice of language where products which are mostly favored by youth are showed in English to attain proximity and appeal. For Example, a bank may show its ads in all regional languages including English but a cell phone with hi-fi features towards which, youth are mostly attracted, releases the ads in English. A high end chocolate, preferred mostly by children is shot in English for it demands affluence and affordability which is commonly associated with familiarity with English language. A cream for Arthritis pain may not choose its ad in English for its appeal to elderly people, who in reality use native language to share the age induced pain with others. Designer jewelers, tourism, hotels, airlines and heavy industry etc which cater to affluent strata try to aggrandize and enrich the image with English. Women accessories and cosmetics are mostly shot in English as they are intended to appeal to the feminine modernity (implying educated women) that may find incongruous and uncomfortable to receive message in native tongue regarding this ultra-modern stuff. Consumer goods like undergarments, condoms (symbolized as masculine paraphernalia, and the discussion about which in public is still a taboo) seek the support of English language for their announcements for the use of native tongue may sound traditionally uncomfortable in pushing the clear message across. They carry the masculinity agenda as the part of their utilitarian value and this doesn’t fetch the appropriateness for the expressions in traditional vernacular. The choice of language when addressing the rural consumers is very discreet. Tej .K. Bhatia says:

Local language identity in rural India is particularly strong; therefore, it is imperative for the advertisers not to overlook the linkage between language and identity. A failure to establish identity between consumers and products through appropriate use of language could be fatal. The indiscriminate and hegemonic use of English media advertising aimed at rural India not only runs the risk of ad failure due to the disconnect between the language of the ad and the language spoken by the target audience, it can also cause the rural consumer feel excluded for the ad’s target group (101).

The professional communities like farmers, truck drivers find English a distant language for the atmosphere they interact and operate in mostly vernacular and thus most of the ads for tractors (and farm related items like pesticides manures etc) and vehicles of heavy transport (with the related lubricants and batteries) are announced in vernacular. Moreover, a mark of nativity and patriotism is attached with these products which are best conveyed in vernacular. Once Asian Paints planned their *diwali* campaign in the rural areas and named it ‘*Utsav*’ to connect with the rural people with a title that brings joy and hilarity. ‘*Utsav*’ was befitting for the product as painting the houses happens to be ritual

during festive seasons and celebrations. (Krishnamacharyulu 256). However, in certain products, women have the final say in making a choice with the view of their greater association with them like detergent soaps and powder, culinary utilities like turmeric, cooking oil, *Garam masale*, traditional hair care products like coconut oil and painkillers etc. It is also a very common feature that such ads are shot with women as the lead roles giving a kind of sweeping recognition to woman as the member of family assigned with tasks of cooking, washing and cleaning. Sharada J. Schaffter identifies that 95% of the ads on such products engage women as models (65). In such ads, they use native tongue to advert them, for these items should appeal to women with diversified backgrounds including not only educated ladies but also average household women lying outside the purview of English language. Finally, the household utility goods like vacuum cleaners, floor and kitchen sanitizers, and home appliances take English along with native language for the language's appeal to the modern woman.

A significant transformation is observed in Anglicization of advertisement of bath soaps once advertised as body cleansers, are now accorded cosmetic value. Earlier native language was preferred to portray cleanliness but English became essential to reflect the cosmetic appeal in it. In a paper submitted at 8th International Congress Marketing Trends at Paris 2009 entitled Content Analysis of Lifebuoy Soap Television Advertisements in the post liberalization Era, Ms. Falguni Vasavada, Assoc.Prof, Marketing Academic Area, Mudra Institute of Communications, Ahmedabad says, "The 100 plus year old brand Lifebuoy, which was purely positioned as a health soap targeted at male population has not got rid of its carboic nature, smells different and is positioned as a family soap". In the transformation of the ad from a health soap to something which assures beauty a very interesting choice of language is made suiting to target the consumer as per the role played by the soap. 'Lifebuoy *Swasthya Chetana*' is the name of the social marketing program launched by HUL to enter into the 'rural' market using the word '*swasthya*' a Hindi equivalent for the word 'health' and '*Chetana*' in the place of English 'awareness'. The choice of these above-mentioned words in Hindi is made to bring the campaign nearer to the village life. The word '*swasthya*' could semantically be closer to that aspect of bath related hygiene as compared with the word 'health' that could include physical well-beingness in other ways than bathing. When the initial advertisement in the 80s and early 90s had the slogan '*Lifebuoy hai jahan...tandurusti hai wahan*' (where there is Lifebuoy ...there is health) the soap did not have the beauty related image but had both the rural and urban consumers in view. Here the use of word '*tandurusti*' although implies 'health' but had the strong shade of 'robustness' thus appealing to the pro macho rural males. At this point of time the soap is properly male centric and had almost no female consumer base. Here the use of the word 'champion' being English, yet is a very familiar word (most happening word in sporting world) even to the Hindi speaking people and thus male robustness is accentuated. This word creates the needed effect even being amidst Hindi filled advertisement. This pre liberalization condition underwent a drastic shift when post liberalization witnessed a change in the consumer's attitude and thus Life buoy had to shift its centre of gravity from a male preferred soap to a family soap, most of all to be a choice of much distanced female consumers. Thus the presentation of Lifebuoy as an anti-pimple beauty soap makes the young model utters in English saying "Pimples ? what's that ?" This an effort to reach the youth in the language in which beauty related terminology is more appreciable and in which they discuss beauty related issues.

Atlas and Hero cycles which are basic model cycles meant for conveyance rather than style adopt Hindi language in their advertisement because most of their consumers in rural backdrop would rely on quality and durability. In these areas where means of transport is limited, cycle is more of a necessity rather than an instrument to flaunt about. Thus Hindi or other native languages would serve the purpose more aptly to convey the expressions of strength, hard work, durability. Even sometimes patriotism is also associated with these cycles. But when coming to the trendy models like BSA SLR, Lady Bird, Hero Ranger and other models which aim the urban youth (and which are relatively costlier models) use catchy English slogans and even songs in English to connect with youth. In this era where a motor cycle is no more a luxury, and urban areas where social transport is well evolved, cycles have

become vehicles for fitness and youthful energy. Such expressions find their way into the youngster's heart when announced in English for it is the language that can carry trendy messages.

The customer's receptivity to the linguistic sign brought forth much attractive content and many captions to appeal to the customer in the apt manner. Advertising became a skilled and intelligent task, when the enormity of product's good is encapsulated into a 15-20 seconds ad. It is neither practically nor financially feasible to protract the ad's duration of contact with customer and yet, the ad is expected to influence the customer's choice. A maximum impact within this transience of contact, forces the ad maker's compliance to clarity, brevity and accuracy. Any ad that lies in the emotional proximity of the customer can provide an enduring brand image to the product against the onslaughts of time and rival brands. To quote *Advertising and Consumer Choice* by Hansen Flemming and Sverre Riis Christensen:

Most modeling of consumers assumes that a cognitive and conscious mental activity in connection with choices is important, not really acknowledging the fact that the process must be routinized to an extreme degree. In spite of quick-reference role of brands, branding theory assumes extensive mental activity over time in order to develop the deep and lasting relationship between consumer and brand (25).

A catchy phrase will impress the minds of the people and ads made most of this aspect of language. Simple and smile evoking captions were never forgotten by people for they are easily registered. The application of figurative touch to these catchy phrases has immortalized some ads. When the caption of Hero Honda employed exaggeration to say "Fill it, Shut it, Forget it!" it won the hearts of thousands of Indians who were conscious about fuel economy. The Pun intended in Idea cellular "Get Idea", is crispy and concise to narrate the good of the network. Antithesis applied in 'Neighbor's Envy'- Owner's pride by Onida has brought forth the emotional distinction a consumer can have with the product.

These days, we are in an emotionally charged atmosphere in the world. A very serious topics like nationalism has come from elite discussion rooms to street corners. Today's youth are more assertive and self-conscious than earlier. Gender consciousness and issues related to gender sensitivity are now not limited to feminist columns but are the part of meaning discussions among teenagers. Gone is the era of exploitative attitude towards the other human and in are the days of symbiotic contribution for the common well of the society. If an advertisement is to make people buy something, then any such product that could appeal to the emotions of the buyer could find place in his list of must buy ones. When Birla group asserted itself as the country's image builder in the post globalization era when its caption read - 'Taking India to world'. An appeal is made to the countrymen about Birla Group's commitment in nation building eroding the capitalist image of the private sector. The use of continuous tense of 'taking' ensures the continuous process and the inseparability of the company with India. Had this been in Hindi, the caption could read as "*Bharat ko duniya me le jate huye...*" or any other possible syntactical formation which could not offer the completeness of expression as that of English. Further expecting the same impact factor of the earlier English caption would also be ambitious as the latter may also have its ambiguity complications. When Dell took the punch line "Power to do more" has all the zeal and get to reflect the company's endeavor of excellence. The caption of Ceat Tyres 'Born Tough' with a Rhinoceros as the brand symbol has connected with the viewer who would expect tyres to be enduring enough to withstand the rugged Indian roads. The ad has appealed to the macho ness of the viewer by aptly juxtaposing the caption along with a Rhino, the latter being rated for its physical robustness. Coke's "Open happiness" is a two word powerful phrase appealing to the youngsters, suggesting the charm of Coke in consummation of their rendezvous with their dearest ones. When chocolates were considered as a child's favorite and obsession to them was considered childish, Cadbury's Dairy Milk gave the caption "A gift for someone you like" has set a trend in youth eating and gifting chocolates making the chocolate synonymous to the Indian *mithai* which is distributed

during happy times. The recent versions of Dairy Milk have a backdrop of an English tune (Kiss me...) with two teenagers lost in lure to savor the chocolate had a strong affect on the viewers of that age group. Such neo cultural themes suggesting proximity between two teenagers yet, not without the adolescent immaturity lingering could have the appeal when a befitting English tune gives naturalness (reflecting the western sanction for such closeness among youngsters). Similarly, Kerela Tourism's 'God's own country', Hutch's 'where ever you go... our network follows', Saffola's 'Good for your heart. Good for your family's health', Pulsar's 'Definitely Male', Indica's 'More car, per car' have utilized English language's grace and flexibility to carry the message effectively. Maharaja Appliances Limited has named its appliances 'Bonus' for the name's attachment with the majority working class and the benign emotion it carries as 'something additional' that is most expected from a middle class person. The choice of the title is justified in the way they marketed the products in common *kirana* merchant shops and not in costly looking showrooms where the general population would be visiting for the name to create impact (256).

All the above captions are designed for manipulating the wonder language makes by reaching the public. It is the intelligence of the copywriter and caption designer to encapsulate the uniqueness and versatility of the product in one single line. The increase of consumerism makes several ad agencies to enhance creativity thereby encouraging the creative writers of English to capture the best appealing sense through wonders of language. The responsibility of the captions writers is revealed ever when the non-user of language also captures the meaning and greatness of the product. Today's growing globalization and consumerism has provided awesome avenues for many creative and imaginative English graduate. As the world became more and more compressed the doors of India are flung open to English. English is more and more used to reach the masses as the most appealing language.

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