

MARINEL GERRITSEN / CATHERINE NICKERSON / CORINE VAN DEN
BRANDT / ROGIER CRIJNS / NURIÁ DOMINGUEZ / FRANK VAN MEURS /
ULRIKE NEDERSTIGT

English in Print Advertising in Germany, Spain and the Netherlands: Frequency of Occurrence, Comprehensibility and the Effect on Corporate Image

1. Introduction & Background

The use of English in promotional business genres is a common feature of the Dutch consumer landscape. The most recent research at the Business Communication Studies department at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, indicates that the use of English is on the increase in the Netherlands in genres as diverse as annual reports and magazines targeted at teenage girls. In addition, there is also evidence that English is fast becoming a feature of certain promotional genres in Germany (2003) and to a lesser extent in Spain (Berns 1995a; 1995b; Graddol 1999). Against this background, however, studies in the nineteen nineties by Gerritsen (1995) in print advertising and Gerritsen, Korzilius, van Meurs and Gijsbers (1999) in TV commercials indicate that although English was in widespread use, there were relatively low levels of comprehensibility for the English that was used among the target population, coupled with a somewhat negative attitude towards its use. Research in Germany in 2003 (Endmark 2003), reveals similar findings in that less than two thirds of a target population were actually able to understand the English used in a set of advertising fragments. It is this apparent mismatch between promotional information and consumer interpretation that we will explore further in this paper.

Elsewhere we have detailed the specific situation in the Netherlands for the use of English where English is in widespread use in a variety of different domains, including education, the media, and particularly, business (Gerritsen and Nickerson, 2004). Figure 1, for instance, shows an example of the type of texts that have now become commonplace in the Netherlands, in which the reader, i.e. consumer, needs to be able to comprehend the many English expressions included in the text in order to understand the overall message. We believe that a similar situation may exist in Germany, and that it may prove possible to identify at least similar trends in Spain.

Figure 1: The increasing use of English in the Netherlands



In print advertising in particular, there has been an identifiable increase in the use of English in many countries in the European

Union in the course of the past decade, from 33% to 81% in the Netherlands from 1994 to 2003, for instance, and from 17% to 75% for the same period for Spain. Table 1 shows these percentages for our target countries, including Italy for the same period, as the increase in English usage there has been so great.

Table 1: The increasing use of English in ads in glossy magazines

Country	Glossy 1994	magazines	Glossy 2003	magazines
Germany	33%		56%	
Spain	17%		75%	
Netherlands	33%		81%	
Italy	1%		25%	

In terms of the existing theories on the use of English in the European context, the most relevant work for our study is that by Berns (1995a; 1995b) and by Graddol (1999). Berns (1995a), for instance, draws on Kachru's 1985-model which classified the status of English around the world, and identifies three groups of countries within the European Union as it was in 1995 (Kachru, 1985). She classifies the UK and the Republic of Ireland as users of native varieties of English; Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain as a group of countries where English is used and will continue to be used as a foreign language (FL); and Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, as countries where English is in the process of developing as a second language (L2). Graddol (1999) also gives an account of English in Europe in the nineteen nineties, including predictions for the future. He views Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands as countries where English will be most likely to attain the status of an L2, he suggests that it may already be part way through that process in the Netherlands and Denmark, and he predicts

that it will be least likely to attain the status of an L2 in Spain. Of particular relevance for our study is the fact that both Berns (1995) and Graddol (1999) predict that Spain is not likely to achieve L2 status for English, both predict that the Netherlands is likely to achieve L2 status (or may have already done so), and opinion is divided on Germany, with Berns suggesting the same future L2 status for English as the Netherlands and Graddol suggesting that Germany is less likely to achieve this than the Netherlands, but more likely to do so than Spain. In our study of the use of English in print advertising, together with consumer comprehensibility and attitudes to English, we therefore expected that English would be used and understood least in Spain, coupled with the most negative attitudes towards its use, whereas English would either be used most, appreciated most and understood best in the Netherlands than in Germany and Spain, or that the situation would be equivalent for Germany and the Netherlands.

In this paper we will address the following research questions for glossy magazines and their target groups in the Netherlands, Germany and Spain.

1. Do the relevant target groups understand English?
2. Do they have a negative or positive attitude towards the use of English?
3. Does the use of English have an effect on corporate image?
4. Are there differences between The Netherlands, Germany and Spain on points 1 to 3 above, and does this suggest a re-evaluation of current theories on the differences between the EU countries in their use of English?
5. Is English indeed increasingly supplanting the national languages in promotional texts, e.g. the advertisements in glossy magazines?

The investigation consisted of two related projects: a corpus analysis using quantitative analyses based on methods drawn from diachronic sociolinguistics, and an experimental investigation, using analytical methods taken from psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and marketing.

It was therefore multidisciplinary and multi-methodological in approach. The team was made up of seven members of staff, and around eighty students of Business Communication, all of whom were in their final year of study for a Masters degree. Each of the projects will be dealt with in turn in sections 2 and 3 below.

2. The Corpus Analysis

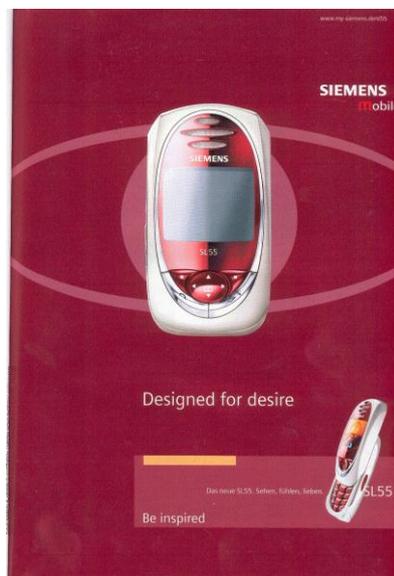
Three comparable corpora were compiled for each country under investigation. These were *Elle* for July 2003 for Germany and the Netherlands and *Cosmopolitan* for July 2003 for Spain. For each corpus, the frequency of occurrence of English lexical items was determined for all the advertisements of at least one complete A4 in size, according to the following criteria:

1. Words that did *not* occur in the most recent authoritative dictionary in each country were considered as English. For Germany, this was the Duden dictionary *Das große Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (1999), for Spain the online (2003) edition of the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* published by the Real Academia Española and for the Netherlands, the *Van Dale Groot Woordenboek der Nederlandse taal* (1999).
2. Words that occurred in the same meaning in an authoritative English dictionary such as the Oxford dictionary of English (2003) or the Macmillan English dictionary for Advanced Learners (2002), or on a UK web-site via Google.

The word *manager*, for instance, does occur in the Dutch Van Dalen, but the word *glossy* does not. In the first instance the lexical item has been assimilated into the “local” language, i.e. Dutch, and was not

counted as English (for the Dutch corpus), whereas in the second instance it has not been assimilated and it was therefore considered as an English item. We were especially interested to what extent there was evidence of norm referencing for English – in this case British English – by identifying those English words that were used but that had not (yet) been assimilated. Complete phrases – such as “Designed for desire” were also counted as English words, as in Figure 2 below, taken in this case from German edition of *Elle* for July 2003.

Figure 2; Complete English phrase in German print advertising



Findings of the Corpus Analysis

The findings of the corpus analysis show that there has been a considerable increase in the use of English in print advertising over the course of the last decade. Table 2 shows the number of ads in each edition of the glossy magazines, together with the number of ads that contained English, ranging from as many as 81% for the Dutch magazine to 56% for the German magazine. The data therefore

showed the use of English in more than half of the total number of ads for all three countries. Further analysis revealed that there were no significant differences between the three countries, an interesting finding that contradicts the views of observers such as Graddol (1999) and Berns (1995a; 1995b) as we have discussed above, who predicted in the nineteen nineties that less English would occur in Spain than in Germany and the Netherlands, and that the situation would either be equivalent in Germany and the Netherlands (Berns) or that more English would occur in the Netherlands than in Germany (Graddol). When we looked at the total number of words in those ads that contained English together with the total number of English words, we found that the English lexis accounted for between 6 % and 8 % percent of the total text (see Table 3). In this case, interestingly, there was a significant difference between Spain and Germany, with the Spanish ads containing the most English words (7.9 %) and the German ads the least (6.0 %). Again this contradicts the predictions made previously on the future status of English within our three target countries.

Table 2: Number of ads and number of ads containing English

	Netherlands	Germany	Spain
Number of ads	21	43	53
Number of ads with English	17 (81%)	24 (56%)	40 (75%)

Finally, we looked at the part of the text in which English occurred in the ads and we found that this was most frequent in the *body*, *slogan* and *header* of the texts for all three countries and most infrequent in the *sales information* (see Table 4 for details). It seemed to be the case that corporations resorted to the local language for each country of the target population concerned, in their presentation of important sales information to the consumer. There were also significant differences between the three countries in the amount of English included in the sales information, with more English occurring in the Dutch texts than

Table 3: Amount of English used

	Netherlands	Germany	Spain
Total number of words in ads with English	1501	1999	3941
Total number of English words	98 (6.5%)	120 (6.0%)	310 (7.9%)

Table 4: Part of text where English occurs

	Netherlands	Germany	Spain
Total number of ads	21	43	53
Ads with header in English	8 (38%)	7 (21%)	11 (31%)
Ads with body in English	16 (76%)	16 (43%)	29 (63%)
Ads with slogan in English	8 (57%)	9 (45%)	6 (24%)
Ads with sales information in English	3 (21%)	2 (6%)	4 (14%)
Ads with name of product in English	11 (52%)	3 (8%)	23 (45%)

in either of the other two countries, and more English occurring in the Spanish texts than in the German texts. Again, the fact that more English occurred in the Spanish texts than in the German texts, contradicts the predictions made by previous commentators in the European situation. One possible explanation for this, however, may

be that there has in fact been more officially standardised assimilation of English in Germany and the Netherlands, as is shown by the inclusion of words of English origin in the standard Dutch and German dictionaries, but not in the standard Spanish dictionary, e.g. the word *weekend* which occurs in the Van Dale and the Duden dictionaries, but not in the Real Academia Española, despite the fact that it is used on Spanish web-sites. This could, of course, have resulted in a higher word count for English items for Germany and the Netherlands, but not for Spain, as a result of the dictionary-based classification system we used in identifying the items of English lexis. Our intention is to investigate this further in future research projects.

3. The Experimental Investigation

The corpus analysis allowed us to identify a number of advertising campaigns that were being run simultaneously across the three countries in the two magazines, including the Siemens “be inspired”, campaign, the Skechers “redefining style” campaign and the Elizabeth Arden “smile with all your senses” campaign. These formed the basis of the experimental investigation, in which we used the original and manipulated versions of several of the standardised campaigns, to investigate the respondents’ comprehensibility of the English used, their attitude towards the use of that English and the effects that these may in fact have on the image projected by the product or organisation promoted through the advertising texts. A total of 360 highly educated (young) women responded to a questionnaire designed to investigate comprehensibility, attitude to English and image of product/service, consisting of 120 respondents for each country. Highly educated young women were used as respondents as they could be considered as representative of the target group of glossy magazines like *Elle* and *Cosmopolitan*.

The investigation used a between group design, such that 60 respondents for each country saw the original (English) version of each advertisement, and 60 saw a manipulated, i.e. Dutch, Spanish, or

German, version. The research team worked together to produce equivalent test items in Dutch, Spanish and German for the original English texts. We used translation and back-translation to ensure as close a match as possible, and the student research team members proved to be extremely skilful in their manipulation of the different electronic versions. Figure 3 shows the manipulated Dutch version of the Elizabeth Arden “smile with all your senses” Green Tea Fragrance Collection advertisement, which was viewed by the Dutch respondents. In the comprehensibility part of the questionnaire, the respondents that saw the original English versions were asked first to self-report on whether they thought they understood the English texts in the advertisements, according to a seven point Likert scale.

Figure 3: The manipulated Dutch version of the “smile with all your senses” campaign.



The self-reporting phase was included in addition to the actual text comprehension test, as this is a common method that has been used in the past to assess the levels of proficiency in English that exist within the European Union (see, for example, Labrie and Quell, 1997). They were then asked to provide a meaning in context, but not a literal translation, for the specific part of the text, i.e. *Smile with all your senses*, for Elizabeth Arden; *Be inspired*, for Siemens; *I love me*, for Chupa Chups; *Footwear; Redefining style!*, for Skechers. At the end of the experiment, the teachers' group, which included native speakers of each of the target languages, met to decide for each individual test item whether or not the translation given could be considered appropriate or not. For instance, the translations for "Footwear" were only considered as acceptable if they contained the concept of shoes in general, not just an example of one type of footwear, as in "boots".

In order to investigate the respondents' attitude towards the use of English versus the use of their own language, all six groups were presented with a set of 10 semantic differentials, contrasting positive and negative items such as *attractive* versus *unattractive*, and asked to complete a 7 point Likert scale. 60 respondents completed the items for the English version of the advertisement, and 60 for the manipulated version in their own language. The part of the questionnaire investigating the image of the product or service presented in the advertisements used the same design, i.e. we presented respondents with a set of 5 semantic differentials such as *modern* versus *old-fashioned*, and asked them to complete a 7 point Likert scale. We wanted to know whether the use of English in an ad has an impact on the image of the product that is advertised. Gerritsen et al (1999) report that advertising agencies generally claim that they incorporate English in their advertising because it provides the product with a modern, innovative image. We therefore incorporated this aspect of image into the questionnaire, investigating specifically whether the products advertised using English were indeed considered as more modern and innovative than the products advertised without using English. Furthermore, we investigated whether a product advertised in English would be considered as a more expensive product than one that was advertised in the respondents' own

language, implying that English could be associated with a willingness to spend more on products viewed as modern and innovative.

Findings of the Experimental Investigation

They findings of the experimental investigation show that the attitude towards the use of English is less negative than it was a decade ago and that the use of English does not have a negative impact on the image of the product. A Cronbach alpha analysis for the ten items that measured attitude to the use of English versus the use of the local language revealed alphas higher than .70 for all the ads. This meant that we could deal with an aggregated set of data for all ten items. The findings showed that the respondents had a neutral attitude towards all the ads, both the versions with English and those in the local language. There was only one significant difference for one of the versions of the Skechers advertisement in the Netherlands, in that the Dutch respondents had a more positive attitude towards the ad not containing English than towards the ad that did. In contrast, the Spanish respondents had a more positive attitude towards the Skechers ad with English than the Germans did, and the Spanish also had a more positive attitude towards the English version of the Elizabeth Arden ad than the Dutch respondents. Our findings therefore did not indicate that ads with English are always more appreciated than those in the local language. They also indicated, once again unexpectedly, that the Spanish may appreciate ads containing English more than either the Germans or the Dutch.

A Cronbach alpha analysis for the 4 items relating to whether the image of the product was viewed as modern or old-fashioned, showed alphas higher than .70 for all the ads for only three of the four items. Our findings here are therefore based on the aggregated data of these three items. Almost all of the responses, with the exception of some of those given in response to the Elizabeth Arden ads, showed that the respondents considered the ads to be more modern than old-fashioned. This was the case both for the ads with English and the ads in the local language. In those instances where there was a significant difference between the two different versions of the ad, then the version with English was considered as more modern than the version

in the local language, as we had expected. This was the case in three instances, for Spain for the Siemens and Skechers ads, and for the Netherlands also for the Siemens ad. There were also two significant differences between the different countries, but only one of these obtained for the version with English, in that the Spanish respondents considered the Elizabeth Arden ad with English as more modern than the Dutch respondents did.

The second characteristic related to product image that we investigated, i.e. whether the respondents viewed the products advertised as more expensive if English was included, did not reveal any significant differences for the two different versions of the ads. Respondents did not believe that the products advertised in the ads with English were more expensive than those advertised in ads without English. There were however differences between the three countries, since the Spanish respondents considered several products as more expensive than either the Germans or the Dutch. This was the case for Siemens for both the ad with and without English and for Skechers for the version of the ad containing English.

The final set of findings for the experimental investigation related to the respondents' comprehensibility of the ads containing English, both their own estimation of their language skills and their actual comprehensibility. In general, all the respondents rated their language skills as high, both in their (self-reported) understanding of the text and in their (self-reported) ability to translate the text. As with some of the findings we have discussed above, however, these findings were not what we had predicted on the basis of the existing literature, (e.g. Labrie and Quell, 1997), since the Spanish respondents rated their language skills higher than the Dutch did for the Chupa Chups ad – perhaps as it is a Spanish product – and the Germans rated their language skills higher than the Dutch for the Elizabeth Arden ad. It was only in the case of the Siemens ad that the higher ratings given by the German and Dutch respondents than the Spanish were those predicted by previous studies. In terms of actual comprehensibility, however, the differences between the three countries were as expected according to the predictions made in previous studies, e.g. Berns (1995). For all four ads, the Spanish were less able to give a correct meaning for the target items, and there were no significant differences between the Dutch and German respondents. For example, 98% of the

Dutch and 95% of the Germans were able to give an appropriate meaning for “be inspired”, compared with only 46% of the Spanish. Overall, 88% of the Dutch respondents could comprehend the texts, 84% of the Germans respondents, and only 49% of the Spanish.

4. Summary of Findings

If we return to the research questions we posed at the beginning of the paper, we can now provide some answers on the basis of our findings:

1. Do the relevant target groups understand English?

Our findings suggested that the German and Dutch respondents were generally – but not entirely - able to understand the English they were presented with. The Spanish claimed that they could understand more English than was actually the case and they also consistently over-estimated their language skills in comparison to the Dutch and the Germans.

2. Do they have a negative or positive attitude towards the use of English?

The respondents had neither a positive nor a negative attitude to the use of English, suggesting that it may be viewed by consumers as a neutral advertising language (see also Piller, 2003 on this point).

3. Does the use of English have an effect on corporate image?

For some products the use of English seemed to be associated with a more modern image. The use of English did not, however, impact the price that the respondents associated with the product, apart from in Spain.

4. Are there differences between The Netherlands, Germany and Spain on points 1 to 3 above, and does this suggest a re-evaluation of current theories on the differences between the EU countries in use of English?

The predictions from the literature were that the Netherlands should either be equivalent to Germany, or more advanced than Germany, in terms of the amount of English used, the language skills of respondents and the positive attitudes held on attitude and image. Spain was predicted as being less positive, not as proficient and with less English in use. Our corpus analysis revealed more English used in Spain than in Germany, although there were no significant differences in the number of ads that contained English between the three countries. There were no significant differences between the countries in terms of attitude to English, and the use of English led to a more modern image and higher price associated with the product only in Spain. In comprehending the texts, the Germans and the Dutch had similar skills, and they were better than the Spanish. We therefore found both similarities and differences to the predictions made by previous commentators, suggesting that a re-evaluation of the status of English within the EU would be timely.

5. Is English indeed increasingly supplanting the national languages in (the ads in) glossy magazines?

Our findings suggest that English will play an increasingly important role in the future, at least in the ads intended for glossy magazines. We believe that this is supported by longitudinal studies over the past decade for the three countries we investigated, all of which show a consistent increase in the occurrence of ads with English, i.e. 33% in 1994 for the Netherlands compared to 81% for 2004; 33% in 1994 for Germany compared to 56% in 2004; 17% in 1994 for Spain compared to 75% for 2004. We believe that this situation may also be the case in the other member states within the EU, as is the case in Italy, for instance, where there has been an increase from 1% to 25% in the past decade.

5. Limitations and Conclusions

Two obvious limitations underlie the design of the research investigation. First, the corpus analysis was based on only one edition

of the magazine(s) with a target readership of highly educated young women. And second, the experiment was carried out with a limited number of respondents all of whom were highly educated. In the future we hope to expand the corpus analysis to include France and Belgium, and also to analyze six editions for each target country, e.g. from April to September 2004. We also hope to look at other publications, in order to extend the target groups within the general populations of each country to include different age groups and different levels of education. A third important methodological point is that the more frequent or similar occurrence of English in Spain compared to the Netherlands and Germany that we identified in our corpus analysis, may be attributable to differences in the way in which dictionaries are compiled. This is something we believe needs further investigation in future projects.

In conclusion we can say that we do not believe that English has attained the status of an L2 in any of the three countries in our project. We do believe, however, that the situation is changing, particularly in terms of comprehensibility, suggesting that English is perhaps becoming more embedded in the local languages. The attitudes to English that our study revealed would certainly seem to suggest that it is already viewed by some consumers as a neutral advertising language. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to assume that the neutral status accorded to English in advertising language that our study revealed, together with increasing levels of English language use and proficiency, could also prove to be the case in other domains, such as education, the media and politics. With this in mind, since some of the similarities and differences we found between the countries were not as predicted by previous studies, we believe that it would be appropriate at this point to re-evaluate current thinking not only on the differences between the countries of the European Union in their use of, attitudes to and familiarity with English, but also – perhaps controversially – on the language policy that is maintained in the future EU as it continues to expand its borders.

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