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**Challenges the Internet  
Brings to the  
Agency-Advertiser  
Relationship**

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Not Understood and  
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“Know

what you can do  
with your  
potatoes?!”



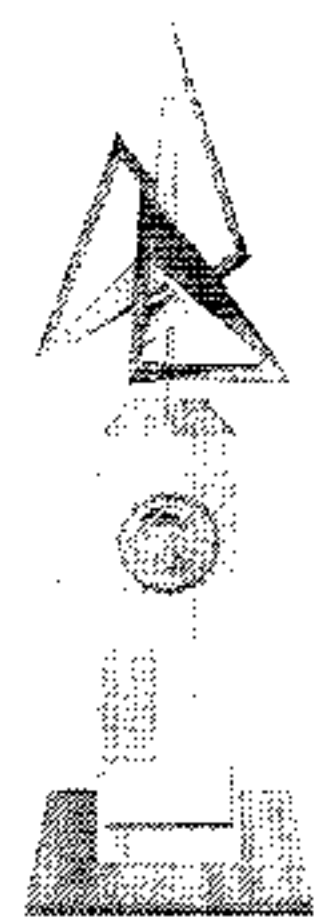
Now there's **Stove Top** OVEN CLASSICS with potatoes.

Roasted Garlic Mashed or Cheesy Au Gratin.

All you add is chicken. Five minutes to make, thirty to bake.

One-dish, oven-baked chicken dinners—their dinners—in minutes! No wonder they're miffed.

*Sunday taste. Tuesday effort.*



ARF Oglivy 2000  
Trophy Winner

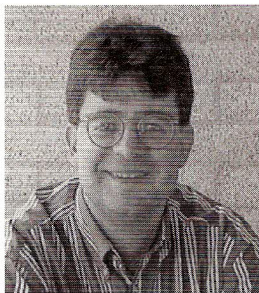




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## English in Dutch Commercials: Not Understood and Not Appreciated

Dutch consumers are increasingly exposed to English in commercials on television. Advertising agencies appear to use English because of financial and image reasons. This article investigates how often commercials that contain English occur in the Netherlands and whether consumers comprehend the English text and appreciate the English that is used.

We show that one-third of the commercials on Dutch television contain English words and phrases that are pronounced with a Dutch accent based on an American English model. Research among 30 Dutch men and 30 Dutch women, evenly distributed across two age groups (15 to 18 and 50 to 57) and three levels of secondary education (low, middle, and high), indicates that all subjects display a rather negative attitude toward the English used in the commercials and that only 36 percent are able to give a rough indication of the meaning of the English used. It is striking that when the English text was not just spoken but was also shown on the screen, 50 percent of the subjects interpreted it correctly; when the text was not shown, only 22 percent gave a correct indication of its meaning. There are strong indications that the use of English increased the extent to which the commercials were miscomprehended.

THE NETHERLANDS is a blank space on the map of the world on which Bailey and Görlach (1986) in their *English as a World Language* indicate where English is spoken as a native language or as an official or semi-official language. They did not think that the use of English by the Dutch in 1986 was such that it could be afforded the status of a semi-official language. In 2000, English in the Netherlands still has no such status, although it is used frequently. Crystal (1997), in his *English as a Global Language*, for instance, remarks that 99 percent of all European companies say they use English as an official language and that virtually all European scientific societies write their annual reports in English. In the Netherlands itself, this Anglicization has not gone unnoticed either. It has been commented on in scholarly publications (De Bot, 1994), in non-specialist articles about the Dutch language (*Onze Taal*, 1997), in news magazines (*Elsevier*, 1998), newspapers (*De Telegraaf*, 1998), and also in magazines about advertising (*Adformatie*, 1997).

All these publications note an increase in the domains in which English is used (education, science, business, and advertising) as well as an increase in the number of English words and phrases that are used; the English terms "feasibil-

ity study," "sale," and "dry cleaning," for instance, are now encountered in Dutch contexts instead of their Dutch equivalents. On the whole, the attitude of these publications toward Anglicization is a negative one; they strongly advocate the use of Dutch.

Even though both scholars and nonspecialists seem convinced that an Anglicization process is taking place, their remarks are mostly based on incidental observations. How often English is really used has seldom been studied systematically. Nor have there been studies of Dutch people's attitude toward and comprehension of the English that is used. This is all the more remarkable, because there can be a lot of money at stake, for instance, in the case of advertising campaigns that are partly or completely in English. Often such campaigns are part of global advertising, in which the same campaign—or part of such a campaign (for example, a slogan)—is used worldwide. This strategy is recommended by marketing experts because it saves translation, adaptation, and registration costs (Jain, 1993; Floor and Van Raaij, 1989; De Mooij, 1994; Walsh, 1991) and because they are of the opinion that the whole world can be approached with one and the same concept (Levitt, 1983)—although this latter view has come in for a great deal of criticism (De Mooij, 1998; Kanso, 1992).

It is remarkable that the debate focuses especially on whether different cultures can be approached with the same advertising concept

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*This article is based on Gijsbers (1997). A Dutch article written on the basis of this manuscript is Gerritsen, Korzilius, Van Meurs, and Gijsbers (1999).*

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(Zandpour et al., 1994) and far less on the language that should be used. If part of a campaign is used globally, the language advertisers choose is English, because it is seen as a global language (Bailey and Görlach, 1986; Crystal, 1997), because the United States plays a very important role in the world of advertising (Mowlana, 1986), and because advertisers believe everyone understands English anyway. In her handbook of global advertising, De Mooij (1994), for instance, says: "The better-educated throughout Europe, as well as the youth, can be reached with English . . ." That her advice seems to have been adopted can be seen from the following passage in Crystal (1997).

As international markets grew, the "outdoor media" began to travel the world, and their prominence in virtually every town and city is now one of the most noticeable global manifestations of English language use. The English advertisements are not always more numerous, in countries where English has no special status, but they are usually the most noticeable.

Myers (1994) also observes that English is found in many advertisements in the Netherlands.

As said earlier, there have been few studies on the use of English in countries where it is neither the native language nor the (semi-)official language. The use of English in advertising would appear to be one of the areas that has been studied most closely. Cheshire and Moser (1994) found that 31 percent of product advertisements ( $n = 1,242$ ) in two Swiss weekly magazines contained English words and phrases, of which 8 percent were completely in English, 73 percent were partly in English, and 19 percent contained only an English name.

Gerritsen (1995) studied the use of En-

glish in product advertisements in newspapers, news magazines, family magazines, and glossy magazines in Spain, Italy, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. In Spain, 7 percent of the advertisements were in English (12 percent completely and 88 percent partly); in Italy this was 6 percent (11 percent completely and 89 percent partly); in France 22 percent (20 percent completely and 80 percent partly); in Germany 19 percent (21 percent completely and 79 percent partly), and in the Netherlands 19 percent (15 percent completely and 85 percent partly). Thus it would seem that the observations in Crystal (1997) quoted above are correct, although there are differences among the various countries. When comparing the figures in Cheshire and Moser (1994) with those in Gerritsen (1995), one should, however, bear in mind that the two studies used different kinds of print media as their sources.

Gerritsen (1996) studied the attitudes of Dutch subjects toward a number of "English only" advertisements that had appeared in Dutch magazines. On the whole, their attitude was not very positive ( $M = 2.7$ ; measured on a five-point scale where 1 is positive and 5 negative), although the attitude of subjects under 25 was significantly more favorable than that of subjects over 45. In addition, Gerritsen studied the subjects' comprehension of the English used. While 70 percent of the subjects claimed they were capable of translating the English text, it turned out that only 51 percent were actually capable of doing so correctly.

The results of this study indicate that the effects of the use of English for commercial purposes in the Netherlands are questionable. Of course, it is likely that advertisements that are completely in Dutch would not have been fully comprehended either. If the results found by Jacoby and Hoyer (1987, 1989) for miscomprehension

of advertisements in the United States also apply to the Netherlands, this would mean that 15 to 23 percent of completely Dutch advertisements would be miscomprehended. If this assumption is correct, the use of English could be said to increase the miscomprehension of the advertisements by 26 to 34 percent.

English is not only used in written advertisements but also in television commercials. It remains to be seen whether the findings for written advertisements also apply to commercials that are completely or partly in English. An advertisement is so completely different from a commercial—written language versus spoken language, enough time to reread the text versus words flying by—that there are good reasons to doubt whether this is really so. Another reason for studying commercials is that this enables us to find out what variety of English is used in commercials on Dutch television (British English, American English, etc.), which can help us to understand the reasons behind the use of English. In this article we first study how much English and what variety of English is used in commercials on Dutch television. Next we investigate subjects' attitudes toward the use of English and whether they understood it. The aim of this study is to gain a greater insight into the Anglicization of commercials in the Netherlands and into the reasons for the use of English in Dutch commercials, as well as to find out whether advertising, which is partly or completely in English, communicates effectively.

#### HOW MUCH ENGLISH AND WHAT VARIETY OF ENGLISH IS USED?

##### Design

We recorded all the television commercials broadcast on one of the nationwide Dutch TV channels, Nederland 1, in the week of October 19 to 25, 1996. In all, 128



different commercials were broadcast. In order to determine whether these commercials contained any English words or phrases, we based ourselves on the 12th edition of the authoritative dictionary of the Dutch language, Van Dale (1992). If a particular English word was included in this dictionary, it was considered to be a Dutch word; if it was not included, we considered it to be an English word. According to this criterion the words *style*, *love*, and *always* were considered to be English words, but *baby*, *job*, *set*, and *commercial* were not.

Whether the spoken English used in the commercials was American English or British English was determined on the basis of the criteria set out by Wells (1982). In addition, a third variant of English appeared to be used: Dutch English. Dutch English is English as it is pronounced by most Dutch speakers, for instance, with a "d" for a "th" in words such as "that" and "there"; with a "t" or an "s" in words such as "thing" and "three"; and a "t" instead of a "d" in words such as "bed" and "food" (Collins and Mees, 1984; Gussenhoven and Broeders, 1997). Whether this Dutch English was pronounced according to a British or an American model was determined on the basis of the pronunciation of, for instance, the "a" in a word such as "lasting," the "t" in the middle of a word such as "battery," and the pronunciation of "r" at the end of a word such as "car" and before a consonant in a word such as "smart."

## Results

**How much English was used?** Of the 128 different TV commercials, 42, one-third, were partly or completely in English. There were two "English only" commercials (5 percent). One of these completely English commercials was a commercial for a watch, which contained relatively

little and simple English: "Your energy, your style, your time, lifetime precision without a battery." The other "English only" commercial contained more complicated English, a dialogue about an international parcel service of more than 10 sentences. The advertising agency, however, had predicted that a Dutch viewer might not be able to understand all this and had added Dutch subtitles. Both commercials are instances of global advertising; they were broadcast in exactly the same form in various countries.

The vast majority (95 percent) of the commercials containing English words and phrases are only partly in English. English words make up between 8 percent and 84 percent of the text of these commercials. In most of the commercials, about one-fifth of the text is in English. The commercials that were partly in English were either adapted or made especially for the Dutch market. The English used in these 40 commercials can be divided into four categories (see Table 1).

Nearly half of the commercials contained product or brand names that were made up of at least one meaningful English word. Names such as "Johnson" or "McDonald's" do not fall into this category, but "Uncle Ben's," "Xylifresh," "Happy Meals," and "Pampers" do. A smaller percentage of the commercials

contained a slogan (11 percent). Examples include: "One break is never enough" and "Nothing beats a Lion" for chocolate bars, and "The spirit of freshness" for a shower gel. Of the English words and phrases used (26 percent), more than half were used to describe the product. A throat lozenge is "sugarfree" and "fresh," a shampoo is described as "invisi'gel" and "style and love for my hair," and a baby's diapers are "baby dry." The rest of the English words and phrases were not used to characterize a product. They are a mixed bag of words and phrases uttered in the middle of Dutch sentences: "take twelve, take twenty-five," and "The more I feel," and "partnership."

A separate category is constituted by the English songs that accompany the commercials to create a particular atmosphere (17 percent). A commercial for a bank is accompanied by "You'll never walk alone," one for an "autumn beer" by "It's the time of the season . . .," while a commercial for another kind of beer uses "I close my eyes, then drift away into the magic night. I softly sing a silent prayer, like dreams do." This last example shows that the link between the subject of a song and the product is not always crystal clear.

**The varieties of English used.** The commercials featuring spoken English contained three different varieties of English: British English, American English, and Dutch English. The Dutch speakers of English always appeared to use American English as a model. Nearly three-quarters of the commercials in which spoken English was used contained Dutch English with an American accent. One-quarter of the commercials used pure American English, and only one commercial (2 percent) used pure British English. This commercial is one of the two that were completely in English; in the other

**TABLE 1**  
The English Used in 40  
Dutch Commercials

	N	%
Product and brand names	21	46
Slogans	5	11
Words and phrases	12	26
Songs	8	17

*Note: Because one commercial contained three categories of English, and four commercials contained two of these categories, the total number of commercials in this Table is 46.*



"English only" commercial, American English was spoken. Both of these commercials were used internationally.

**Why are there so many commercials featuring Dutch English based on an American model?**

In order to answer the question why commercials containing English are broadcast on Dutch television, we interviewed 10 advertising agencies responsible for making or adapting the commercials that were either completely or partly in English.

An important argument for the use of English appears to be a financial one. The advertising agencies prefer not to translate English commercials because this costs money. The same is true for slogans (for example, "Always Coca-Cola") and for meaningful product and brand names (e.g., "Organics," "Fisherman's friend"). The advertising agencies say that it is not necessary to spend this money in the Netherlands, because, like De Mooij (1994), they believe that everybody understands English anyway. Moreover, they believe that the use of English is good for a product's image; this would lead to a product being associated with a young, dynamic, international lifestyle. This is why they also like using English when the product is solidly Dutch. The commercial for a Dutch cheese spread, for example, uses an English song "The way you wear your hair, the way you sip your tea, the memory of all that . . . no, no, they can't take that away from me . . ." A final argument for using English is that there is no Dutch word for a certain product, for instance, "airbag."

Which of these arguments apply to the commercials containing English that occur in our corpus? None of our 42 commercials contained English words that lack good Dutch equivalents. This means that there exists no purely linguistic reasons for the use of English here. Instead, the

**The use of English words, phrases, and songs in commercials (43 percent in all) can only be explained as a matter of image. English would appear to be used only to give an international, "cool," modern flavor to the product.**

use of English is inspired by financial and image considerations. The financial arguments do not apply to the use of English songs or the occasional English word or phrase in otherwise Dutch commercials but only apply to the two commercials that are exclusively in English, to the English product and brand names, and to the English slogans (59 percent in all). It is striking that slogans that are left untranslated in the Netherlands are translated in other countries. Philips' slogan "Let's make things better" becomes "Faisons toujours mieux" in France, "Juntos hacemos tu vida mejor" in Spain, and "Mari Jadikan Segalanya Lebih Baik" in Indonesia. This indicates that advertising agencies believe that the Dutch target audience understands the English used and that it has positive associations for them. Although the use of English in these "English only" commercials, and in commercials featuring English product and brand names and slogans, can be explained on financial grounds, it also appears to be used because it is thought to be good for the product's image.

The use of English words, phrases, and songs in commercials (43 percent in all) can only be explained as a matter of image. English would appear to be used only to give an international, "cool," modern flavor to the product. Advertising agencies apparently think that an English characterization is better for a product than a Dutch characterization. "Fresh" and "happy" are felt to sound more dynamic than their Dutch counterparts "fris" and

"gelukkig," "baby dry" seems to be dryer than the Dutch "baby droog," and an English song is felt to create a better atmosphere than a Dutch one.

The image a company wants to create is not only determined by the language used in the commercial but also by the use of a particular variety of that language. In the commercials we studied, the variety used is especially Dutch English based on an American model. This is clearly intended to make consumers associate the product with an American lifestyle. Why is the American variety used rather than the British one? Advertising agencies probably think that American English has more positive associations than British English. Research by Van der Haagen (1998) among secondary school pupils in the Netherlands suggests that the advertising agencies are right. Dutch secondary school pupils feel that American English is more dynamic and more attractive than British English. A second reason for using Dutch English with an American accent may be that British English is associated with something not everybody enjoys to the same extent: school. In virtually all Dutch schools, British English is used as a model (Van der Haagen, 1998).

A final question is why the commercials do not use spoken American English but Dutch English with an American accent. One important reason, of course, is that the majority of the commercials also contain Dutch and are therefore recorded by native speakers of Dutch, who are probably selected for reasons other than a per-



fect pronunciation of English. Moreover, by using Dutch English, companies meet their customers halfway. Not only is it easier for most Dutch people to understand English with a Dutch accent than it is to understand American English, but by using Dutch English companies also show that they associate themselves with their target group (Crystal, 1987; Giles and Coupland, 1988). They also make it a bit easier for the customer to buy the product. If a Dutch pronunciation of English is used even on TV, the customer certainly has the right to ask for "Smis-sjips," "Fisjermens frent," or "Ksielifresj" (= Smith's Chips, Fisherman's Friend, and Xylifresh).

### ATTITUDE AND COMPREHENSION

In the previous section we have seen that more than one-third of the commercials on Dutch television contain English words and phrases. Interviews with advertising agencies show that they use English because they believe that the Dutch understand English fairly well and because they think that it is good for a product's image when it is associated with an American lifestyle. The interviews we conducted with advertising agencies revealed that these linguistic aspects of the commercials were not pretested. In this section we will investigate whether their intuitions are correct.

### Design

**Subjects.** A study of subjects' attitudes toward and comprehension of English in commercials was carried out among 30 men and 30 women, evenly distributed across two age groups (15 to 18 and 50 to 57) and three levels of secondary education (high, middle, and low),\* in the

\*In the Dutch educational system, there is a division between three levels of secondary education. The highest level, which gives pupils access to university education, is now called VWO (for pupils aged 12 to 18) and used to be called gymnasium (for pupils aged 12 to 18), HBS and MMS (for pupils aged 12 to 17) up to 1968. The middle level is now

southern Dutch town of Helmond (about 77,000 inhabitants). The combination of the subjects' sex, age, and education resulted in 12 cells, each containing five subjects.

The 15- to 18-year-old subjects were selected by means of a two-stage clustering sample in which three secondary schools, each with a different educational level, were randomly selected. Next, each school randomly assigned us an available class. In each classe (of approximately 20 students), all students participated in the research. Afterwards, five female and five male students were randomly selected from each of the classes. The data collection took place in the classroom.

The 50- to 57-year-old subjects were sampled as follows. The subjects with a high educational level were a random sample from a list of former students of the high-level secondary school. The subjects with a middle and low education can be characterized as a convenience sample. They came from a network of relatives and acquaintances of the fourth author, who were asked to participate voluntarily. The gathering of the data among the 50- to 57-year-old subjects took place, on an individual basis, at the subject's home.

Sex was introduced as a variable because a number of sociolinguistic studies have shown differences between women and men in their evaluation of language varieties. Women generally have a more positive attitude toward standard languages than toward substandard varieties, such as dialects, whereas for men this is the other way around (Trudgill, 1972; Brouwer, 1989). This means that there are possible differences between women and men in their evaluation of English. If English is considered to be a "standard" language, men may be expected to have a

called MAVO and used to be called MULO (for pupils aged 12 to 16). The lowest level is LEAO and used to be called LBO (for pupils aged 12 to 16).

more positive attitude toward it. Research into the evaluation of English in product advertisements in Dutch print media, however, showed no significant sex differences in this respect (Gerritsen, 1996).

There were several reasons for selecting two different age groups. In the first place, research into the attitude toward and the comprehension of English in written advertisements showed that young people displayed a more positive attitude toward English than older people and that young people showed a better understanding of English (Gerritsen, 1996). The question is whether this is also true for English in TV commercials. A second reason was that the advertising agencies claimed that commercials containing English were aimed at young people, whereas viewing figures indicated that the commercials we studied were mainly watched by older people. Our research showed that most of the commercials containing English were broadcast before and after the eight o'clock news. According to official viewing figures, 52 percent of the viewers at that time were more than 50 years old, while only 7 percent were between 13 and 19 years old (Reneman, 1996). We wanted to find out to what extent the commercials containing English were appreciated and understood by both the intended target group and the actual viewers.

Subjects were selected from three different levels of education because research into Dutch people's attitudes toward the use of English words and phrases showed that subjects with a lower educational background were more positive about this than subjects who were more highly educated (Withagen and Boves, 1991).

### Commercials

For the comprehension and attitude tests we chose six commercials that were either partly or completely in English and that theoretically might be of interest to all



subjects. Table 2 shows the text of these commercials. All 6 commercials were selected from the 42 partly or completely English commercials that we had found on Dutch TV in 1996.

### Procedure

**Attitude.** The subjects' attitudes toward the use of English in the commercials was measured in the following way. The sub-

jects were shown a commercial and immediately afterwards they were asked to indicate on a five-point scale to what extent they agreed that the use of English in the commercial was "poetic," "irritating,"

**TABLE 2**

The Text of Six English Commercials on Dutch Television

Commercial (product)	Text	Text on Screen	English Translation of Dutch Phrases
(1) Studio Line (hair gel)	<p><sup>a</sup>FX Studio Line by L'Oréal, <i>style and love for my hair, invisigel FX</i>, plakt niet,</p> <p><sup>b</sup>liquid gel FX, geen restjes</p> <p><sup>c</sup>spray film FX, lang in model</p> <p><sup>d</sup>FX by Studio Line, style and love for my hair, FX Studio Line by L'Oréal</p> <p><i>Song: Feels so natural, spirit of love</i></p>	<p><sup>a</sup>not sticky, plakt niet, ne colle pas</p> <p><sup>b</sup>sans residu, geen restjes, no residue</p> <p><sup>c</sup>longue tenue, lang in model, long lasting</p>	<p><sup>a</sup>not sticky</p> <p><sup>b</sup>no residue</p> <p><sup>c</sup>long lasting</p>
(2) Fa (shower gel)	<p><sup>a</sup>Ontdek de nieuwe FA douchegel met exotische ingrediënten en fascinerende geuren.</p> <p><sup>b</sup>Beleef de nieuwe frisheid van Fa.</p> <p><sup>c</sup><i>Fa the spirit of freshness</i></p>	<p><sup>c</sup><i>the spirit of freshness</i></p>	<p><sup>a</sup>Discover the new Fa shower gel with exotic ingredients and fascinating scents.</p> <p><sup>b</sup>Experience the new freshness of Fa.</p>
(3) Twix (chocolate bar)	<p><sup>a</sup>De feestjes van mijn moeder lopen altijd uit op niks als ze voor mij de ware probeert te vinden.</p> <p><sup>b</sup><i>Twix one break is never enough.</i></p> <p><i>Song: Twix is who I can be. Twix is what I really need.</i></p>	<p><sup>b</sup><i>Twix one break is never enough</i></p>	<p><sup>a</sup>My mother's parties always come to nothing when she tries to find Mr. Right for me.</p>
(4) Seiko (watch)	<p>Your energy, your style, your time, your Seiko kinetic, <i>lifetime precision without a battery.</i></p>		
(5) Nationale Nederlanden (insurance)	<p><i>My fans are my pension plan.</i></p> <p>Nationale Nederlanden, wat er ook gebeurt.</p>		whatever happens
(6) Lion (chocolate bar)	<p><i>Song: Wild thing, you make my heart sing, you make everything groovy. Is that right, wild thing, I think I love you.</i></p>	<p><i>Nothing beats a lion</i></p>	

Note: The italics in column 2 indicate which parts were used for the comprehension test. The letters in superscript (a, b, c, d) indicate the order in which the passages are heard in the commercial.



"easy going," "superfluous," "affected," "functional," "arrogant," or "sympathetic." These adjectives were chosen because they are often used in discussions on the use of English in Dutch texts. Four of these adjectives can be qualified as positive ("poetic," "easy going," "functional," and "sympathetic") and four as negative ("irritating," "superfluous," "affected," and "arrogant"). A one on the five-point scale stood for "I agree completely" and a five for "I do not agree at all."

**Comprehension.** The subjects' comprehension of the English in the six commercials was tested in two rounds, each of which yielded two different types of information. In the first round, subjects were shown a commercial and asked three things: (1) to fill in five-point semantic differentials in order to measure their attitude toward the English used (see above); (2) to indicate whether they understood the commercial; and (3) to indicate whether they would be able to translate the English in the commercial. The same three-step procedure was repeated for each of the six commercials. In the second round, subjects were again shown the same six commercials but now they were presented with a text in which the whole commercial was transcribed except for the English fragments printed in italics in (1) to (6) in Table 2. The subjects were asked to write down these English fragments and to describe their meaning. Again this procedure was repeated for each of the six commercials. Spelling mistakes were ignored in the evaluation of the transcriptions, and both literal translations and rough translations that reflected the essence of the English text were considered correct, for example, the translation "A Lion is the most delicious chocolate bar" for "Nothing beats a Lion."

## Results

**Attitude.** For each of the six commercials a reliability test was performed to determine whether the scores for the four positive adjectives were similar enough to combine into a single score. A similar test was performed for the four negative adjectives. Both the positive and the negative items showed a high correlation. Subsequently, the scores for the negative items were recoded in such a way that they could be compared with the scores of the positive items, a 1 indicating a positive attitude toward the English used and a 5 a negative attitude. For each of the commercials, a reliability test was performed with the four positive items and the four recoded negative items. All alphas are higher than .80. This means that the answers for the eight adjectives are very similar and that it is possible to combine the scores and to express the attitude toward the English in each of the commercials by means of one figure.

Table 3 shows the mean score for each commercial for both age groups and the three levels of education. The subjects' attitudes toward the use of English is generally higher than 3 and thus on the negative side. A breakdown analysis by sex was not necessary because a three-way analysis of variance with the between-subject factors age, sex, and education showed no significant main effects for sex. Women and men have a similar attitude toward the use of English in Dutch TV commercials.

A comparison of the second and third columns of Table 3 reveals that young subjects always have a more positive attitude toward English in commercials than older subjects. This age difference is statistically significant for all commercials except the Fa commercial (see Table 4, column 4). These results confirm those found

by Gerritsen (1996) in her study of attitudes toward the use of English in product advertisements in Dutch print media. The analyses of variance for all the commercials together also showed that age plays an important role: 31 percent of the variance (see Table 4, column 5) in attitude toward the use of English in commercials can be explained by age.

The age differences in attitude toward English in commercials on Dutch television are the most obvious, but there are also four significant effects for level of education (Table 4, column 8). A Least Significant Difference Analysis (LSD) showed, however, that there were significant differences between the groups on the 0.05 percent level for only two of those four commercials. Subjects with a low level of education appreciated the use of English in the Studio Line commercial significantly more than those with a middle or a high level of education. The findings for the Seiko commercial were the exact opposite. People with a high level of education had a more positive attitude toward the use of English in this commercial than people with a low level of education. It is plausible that the influence of educational differences on appreciation of the use of English can be explained by differences in comprehension.

Studio Line is the only commercial in which a great part of the English text appears in a French and Dutch translation on the screen. It is possible that, as a result of this, the group that did not have a very good knowledge of English thought they understood the commercial, and this may have led to a more positive attitude toward the English used. The only "all English" commercial in our study, the Seiko commercial, was understood better by the people with a higher education than by the people with a lower education, and this might be the reason why the former



**TABLE 3**

The Attitude Toward English in Commercials on Dutch Television (1 = Positive, 5 = Negative, M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation)

Commercial	Age		Education			Total
	15-18 N = 30 M SD	50-57 N = 30 M SD	Low N = 20 M SD	Middle N = 20 M SD	High N = 20 M SD	N = 60 M SD
Studio Line	3.3 0.8	3.9 0.9	3.2 1.0	3.8 0.9	3.8 0.7	3.6 0.9
Fa	3.1 0.9	3.3 1.0	3.4 0.9	3.1 1.9	3.2 1.0	3.2 1.0
Twix	2.8 1.0	3.7 0.8	2.9 1.2	3.3 0.8	3.4 0.9	3.2 1.0
Seiko	2.8 1.0	3.4 1.1	3.7 1.3	3.1 0.9	2.6 1.1	3.1 1.1
Nationale	3.0	3.7	3.6	3.5	2.8	3.3
Nederlanden	0.9	1.1	0.8	1.1	1.1	1.1
Lion	2.4 1.1	4.0 1.2	3.7 1.3	3.1 1.3	2.9 1.3	3.2 1.3
Total	3.0 0.5	3.7 0.7	3.6 0.7	3.4 0.7	3.2 0.7	3.4 0.7

**TABLE 4**

The Attitude toward English in Commercials on Dutch Television: Differences between Age Groups and Groups with Different Levels of Education Tested by Means of One-way Analyses of Variance

Commercial	Age				Education			
	df	F-ratio	p-value	$\eta^2$	df	F-ratio	p-value	$\eta^2$
Studio Line	1.48	9.46	.00	0.13	2.48	3.95	.03	0.11
Fa	1.31	0.43	NS	0.01	2.31	0.37	NS	0.01
Twix	1.47	16.07	.00	0.21	2.47	2.14	NS	0.06
Seiko	1.48	4.82	.03	0.07	2.48	5.18	.01	0.15
Nationale Nederlanden	1.32	6.67	.01	0.10	2.32	3.65	.04	0.10
Lion	1.47	30.40	.00	0.34	2.47	3.58	.04	0.08
Total	1.47	26.25	.00	0.31	2.47	1.72	NS	0.04



appreciated the English text more than the latter did.

A comparison of columns 5 and 9 in Table 4 shows that the explained variance for all commercials together of the factor level of education (4 percent) is much lower than the explained variance for the factor age (31 percent).

In order to find out whether there were significant differences between the six commercials in appreciation of the English text, paired *t*-tests were performed. These tests revealed that there was only one significant difference. The English used in the Studio Line commercial was appreciated less ( $M = 3.6$ ) than the English used in the Twix commercial (3.2) (Paired *T*-test:  $t = 3.51$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). Again the subjects' comprehension of the text would seem to play a part.

In summary, all subjects displayed a rather negative attitude toward the English in the six commercials that we studied. There were no differences between women and men, and the subjects' level of education only played a modest role. The differences between the age groups are, however, numerous and unambiguous: the older generation has a significantly more negative attitude toward the English used in the commercials than the younger generation.

### Comprehension

Table 5 summarizes the results of the four different aspects of the study of the subjects' comprehension of the English used in the six commercials.

It shows that our subjects' own estimation of their comprehension (column 2) and their translation abilities (column 3) is rather high. No less than 82 percent of the subjects claimed to understand the English used in the commercials and 76 percent claimed to be able to translate it. Both men and women and younger and older subjects held the same views in these re-

spects. There was only a difference between the various levels of education. The subjects with a high level of education had higher self-esteem than those with a middle or a low education. The differences are also statistically significant according to  $\chi^2$ -tests (comprehension:  $\chi^2 = 6.11$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .047$ ; translation:  $\chi^2 = 7.83$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .02$ ).

The results in column 4 of Table 5 show that the subjects greatly overestimated their knowledge of English. In more than half of the cases (56 percent) there were errors in the transcription of the fragments, not including spelling mistakes such as "lofe" for "love" and "enoug" for "enough." The English fragments in the Fa, Twix, and Lion commercials were relatively

well transcribed (64 percent), compared to the other commercials (23 percent). This is probably due to the fact that in these commercials the spoken English texts also appeared on the screen.

In view of this, the percentages of correctly transcribed text are quite low for these commercials: even if the English words and phrases can be read from the screen, a lot of people do not transcribe them correctly. Fa's "Spirit of freshness" was, for instance, transcribed as "The spirit of fitness" and "For refreshment"; the Twix slogan "One break is never enough" as "The soul can't beat Twix" and "A sue by Twix"; and "Nothing beats a Lion" as "Nothing beast" and "Bether is allong a Lion."

**TABLE 5**  
Comprehension of English\*

Commercial	Claims to Understand the English Text	Claims to be Able to Translate the English Text	English Text Correctly Transcribed	Meaning Correctly Described
Studio Line	45	38	3	2
	75%	63%	5%	3%
Fa <sup>a</sup>	40	36	41	36
	93%	84%	68%	58%
Twix <sup>a</sup>	53	51	41	27
	90%	86%	68%	45%
Seiko	50	44	29	28
	83%	73%	48%	47%
Nationale Nederlanden	31	3	10	10
	70%	73%	17%	17%
Lion <sup>a</sup>	49	47	34	29
	83%	80%	57%	48%
Total	268	248	158	132
	82%	76%	44%	36%

\*The figures indicate how many subjects claimed to be able to understand the English, to be able to translate the text, correctly described the meaning of the text, and correctly transcribed the English text. The percentages indicate the percentage of all the subjects who answered the question.

<sup>a</sup>In these commercials, the English that was to be transcribed and whose meaning was to be described also appeared as text on the screen.



The percentage of correctly transcribed fragments was much lower for the commercials in which the English text did not appear on the screen (23 percent). The fragment to be transcribed in the Studio Line commercial—"style and love for my hair, invisigel FX"—was perceived, e.g., as "Style grow of my hair" and "Invisual terrifics." The sentence "My fans are my pension plan" became "My friends are my panners" and "My fans are my pitch and plan," and "Life time precision without a battery" became "Life procession in your time."

Although we only found significant differences in the subjects' estimation of their knowledge of English between the various levels of education (Table 5, columns 2 and 3), we also found significant age and education differences for the transcription test. Table 6 summarizes the significant differences. Subjects with a high educational level were always better at transcribing the English fragments than subjects with a middle educational level and these, in turn, always performed better than subjects with a low educational level

(67 percent, 37 percent and 27 percent, respectively, correctly transcribed fragments for all commercials together: 42 percent, 18 percent, and 10 percent for all commercials without text on the screen; and 93 percent, 57 percent, and 43 percent for all commercials with text on the screen).

This educational stratification is in line with the stratification of the self-evaluation tests. The younger generation always transcribed better than the older generation (57 percent correctly transcribed versus 30 percent for all commercials together; 37 percent versus 10 percent without text on the screen; and 78 percent versus 50 percent with text on the screen). It is striking that we did not find such age differences in the self-evaluation tests. The older generation overestimated their knowledge of English to a greater degree than did the younger generation. Alternatively, they may not have been willing to admit openly to the young female interviewer that they did not understand all the English phrases in the commercials. Again, there were no significant

gender differences; men and women did not differ in the correctness of their transcription of the English fragments.

The last column of Table 5 shows how often subjects correctly described the meaning of the italicized fragments in Table 2. In nearly two-thirds of the cases the meaning of the English fragments was not understood. This means that the marvelous English characterizations given to products often completely pass our subjects by. The meaning of the phrase summing up the qualities of the Seiko watch—"lifetime precision without a battery"—was said to be "Lifetime" and "Slow lasting," and the meaning of "Nothing beats a Lion" was said to be "Nothing beast."

Table 7 shows that there were again significant differences between the different age groups and the groups with different educational levels. Young people were better at describing the meaning than old people (47 percent correct versus 25 percent) and the subjects with a high education were better than subjects with a middle education, and these, in turn, were

**TABLE 6**  
Differences in Correctly Transcribing the Spoken English Texts

Commercial	Age			Education			Sex
	$\chi^2$	df	p-value	$\chi^2$	df	p-value	p-value
Studio Line	NS	—	—	NS	—	—	NS
Fa <sup>a</sup>	6.14	1	.010	14.02	2	.001	NS
Twix <sup>a</sup>	NS	—	—	14.02	2	.001	NS
Seiko	8.08	1	.001	10.14	2	.006	NS
Nationale Nederlanden	12.00	1	.001	12.48	2	.002 <sup>b</sup>	NS
Lion <sup>a</sup>	4.34	1	.037	10.72	2	.005	NS
Total with text on screen	15.05	1	.001	35.10	2	.001	NS
Total without text on screen	17.88	1	.001	18.07	2	.001	NS
Total	25.98	1	.001	43.60	2	.001	NS

<sup>a</sup>In these commercials the spoken English text that was to be transcribed appeared as text on the screen.

<sup>b</sup>In this case the condition for  $\chi^2$  testing was not fulfilled because some of the expected frequencies were too low.

NS: Not Significant



**TABLE 7**

Differences in the Correctness of Subjects' Descriptions of the Meaning of the Spoken English Text with and without the Text Appearing on the Screen

Commercial	Age			Education			Sex
	$\chi^2$	df	p-value	$\chi^2$	df	p-value	p-value
Studio Line	NS	1	NS	NS	2	NS	NS
Fa <sup>a</sup>	NS	1	NS	24.82	2	.001	NS
Twix <sup>a</sup>	NS	1	NS	17.37	2	.001	NS
Seiko	1.31	1	.001	14.60	2	.001	NS
Nationale Nederlanden	7.68	1	.006	17.52	2	.001	NS
Lion <sup>a</sup>	3.27	1	.007	16.55	2	.001	NS
Total with text on screen	5.00	1	.025	53.52	2	.001	NS
Total without text on screen	18.51	1	.001	22.05	2	.001	NS
Total	18.25	1	.001	67.70	2	.001	NS

<sup>a</sup>In these commercials the spoken English text whose meaning was to be described appeared as text on the screen.

better than subjects with a low education (63 percent, 32 percent, and 12 percent, respectively). The differences between the levels of education are again in line with the differences found in the self-evaluation tests, but the differences between the age groups are not. The older generation again overestimated its knowledge of English.

Similar patterns were found in the study of the comprehension of English in product advertisements in written media in the Netherlands (Gerritsen, 1996). The percentage of correct translations, however, was substantially higher in that study: 51 percent. From this it might be concluded that written English is understood better than spoken English. The following paragraph will show that the data from our study of the comprehension of spoken commercials support this conclusion.

The last column of Table 5 clearly shows that the meaning of some commercials was described far better than the meaning of others. It is difficult to say to which factors this can be attributed, since

each English text was different. There is, however, one factor that clearly plays a role: whether or not the spoken English text appeared on the screen. If this is not the case, only 22 percent of the subjects described the meaning correctly, but if the text did appear on the screen, this was 50 percent. It is striking that this percentage is almost the same as the percentage Gerritsen (1996) found for written product advertisements in English. The differences between the age groups and levels of education are statistically significant for both commercials without text on the screen and commercials with text on the screen (see Table 7). All these differences point in the same direction: the younger generation performed better than the older generation (without text on the screen, 35 percent versus 9 percent correctly described it; with text on the screen, 59 percent versus 42 percent). The subjects with a higher education were better at describing the meaning of the English texts than those with a middle education and these in turn performed better than the subjects with a low education (without text on the screen

42 percent, 18 percent, and 7 percent correctly described it; with text on the screen, 85 percent, 48 percent, and 18 percent, respectively).

#### The link between attitude and comprehension

It seems reasonable to assume that there is a link between subjects' attitudes toward the use of English in commercials and how well subjects believe they understand English, or how well they actually understand it. In order to research this, a stepwise regression analysis on an individual level was performed with attitude as the independent variable and with four dependent variables: the subjects' claim about how well they understand the English text; the extent to which they claim to be able to translate it; the correctness of their transcription; and how well they describe the meaning.

This analysis revealed only one significant predictor of the subjects' attitude toward English in commercials: the correctness of their transcription. The better people transcribe the English frag-



ments, the more positive is their attitude ( $F = 17.99$ ,  $df = 1.57$ ,  $\beta = -.49$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $R^2 = .23$ ). The three other variables do not significantly contribute to explaining subjects' attitudes. If they are incorporated into the model, the explained variance does not increase. This means that the subjects' attitudes are determined only by their ability to transcribe the English text—even with spelling mistakes. The significant differences that were found between the subjects' attitudes toward the English in the Studio Line commercial and in the Twix commercial can be seen in the same light. The English in the Studio Line commercial was transcribed least well, 5 percent correct and the English in the Twix commercial was transcribed best, 68 percent correct (see Table 5, column 4).

#### CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Two of the reasons advertising agencies give for using English in commercials are, first, that it is good for a product's image to be associated with English, and, second, that everyone in the Netherlands understands English anyway. In light of the results of our study, we have to wonder whether they are right. The subjects' attitudes toward the use of English are certainly not very positive, not even among the young subjects, who appreciate it considerably more than the older subjects.

The results of this part of our study are strikingly similar to the results of research into attitudes toward the use of English in product advertisements in Dutch print media.

The fairly negative attitude toward English could lead to consumers' not buying products that are advertised in English. Advertising agencies should, therefore, consider whether advertising in English is indeed financially attractive. Advertising in English, of course, saves the costs of translation and registration, but it is pos-

sible that the savings made are considerably smaller than the losses that may be incurred because customers have negative feelings about English and therefore may not buy the products advertised in this way. On the other hand, subjects' evaluations of an advertisement's characteristics do not necessarily capture all of their attitudes toward the advertisement (Burke and Edell, 1986, 1987). More research is needed to find out whether a negative attitude on the part of a consumer toward the language used in advertising actually determines his or her behavior.

The situation concerning subjects' understanding of English is not as rosy as the makers of the commercials suppose either. The subjects may think that they understand the English used (about 80 percent), but when they are asked to explain what is meant, it turns out that only 36 percent are able to do so. It is noteworthy that there is a large difference between the young subjects (47 percent) and the older ones (25 percent) and between the subjects with a high level of education (63 percent), those with a "middle education" (32 percent), and those with a low level of education (12 percent).

On the one hand, this lack of understanding may seem unimportant because consumers do not realize that they do not always understand the commercial and because a commercial aims at more than just conveying a message, for instance, at raising consumers' awareness of the brand name. On the other hand, consumers' correct understanding of the message is usually a prerequisite for the commercial achieving the desired communicative effect (Pieters and Van Raaij, 1992). The intended message was only understood by one-third of the subjects. It is true that this percentage is higher among the target group the commercials aim at, the young (47 percent), but this percentage is lower among the older subjects (25 percent),

who are the actual viewers according to official viewing figures. Sometimes the misunderstanding of the English used is definitely disadvantageous to the product, for example, when "Lifetime precision without a battery" is taken to mean "Slow lasting."

One important finding of our study is that the subjects' understanding of the meaning of spoken English words and phrases increases when the text is also shown on the screen. When this is the case, the percentage of utterances that are interpreted correctly increases by almost 30 percent. This means that when, for financial reasons, it is important to use English in a commercial, the viewers' understanding of the English used can be increased by showing the English as text on the screen. If, in addition, the English words are easy to transcribe, the viewers' attitudes toward the English used will probably not be all that negative. It should be realized, however, that even then only 50 percent of the viewers understand what is meant and that their attitude toward the English used is not a positive one (3.2, where 1 is positive and 5 is negative).

The question that naturally arises is to what extent the use of English increases the miscomprehension of a commercial, as completely Dutch commercials are, of course, not always fully comprehended either. Unfortunately, we are not aware of any research into Dutch viewers' miscomprehension of commercials that are completely in Dutch, but the results of research in the United States published by Jacoby and Hoyer (1982a) indicate that 22 to 34 percent of commercials were miscomprehended. It is hard to say whether these figures also apply to Dutch commercials in 1996. In addition, the methodology and statistical treatment of the results used in Jacoby and Hoyer (1982a) have come in for much criticism (see Ford and



Yalch, 1982; Mizerski, 1982; Jacoby and Hoyer, 1982b). However, if we assume that the percentage of miscomprehended commercials is the same in the Netherlands, this would mean that the use of English when the English text is also shown on the screen increases miscomprehension by 16 to 28 percent, and the use of English without the English text appearing on the screen increases miscomprehension by 30 to 42 percent.

Just as in a study of attitudes toward the use of English in written advertisements (Gerritsen, 1996) no gender differences were found in subjects' comprehension of and attitudes toward the English in commercials. This indicates that English has a very special position in the Dutch language community, which cannot be defined as that of a super standard language nor as that of a substandard variety.

The question is whether the age differences in subjects' attitudes toward English and in their understanding of English are to be interpreted as age-grading—which means that over the years the attitude of the younger subjects will become more negative and that their understanding of English will decrease—or as real changes in the understanding of and attitudes toward English in commercials.

There are several reasons for assuming that the latter interpretation is more plausible. First of all, a person's knowledge of a foreign language does not decrease all that quickly. Second, the Anglicization of Dutch society is a fairly recent development, which began after World War II and which accelerated in the 1970s as a result of the internationalization of many aspects of Dutch society and because English became the most widely used global language in this period (DeVries, Willems, and Burger, 1993). Finally, this quite intensive exposure to English (Van der Haagen, 1998) probably results in a better understanding and more favorable

attitude on the part of young people. That this is probably a real change in Dutch people's understanding of and attitude toward English will be music to the ears of the advertising agencies. Yet some caution may be called for. The knowledge of English in the Netherlands will probably remain at its present level or become even better, but one may wonder whether this will result in a more positive attitude toward English.

In a period of European unification such as ours, people attach great value to their own identity and to all that symbolizes this identity, for example, their own language (Crystal, 1997). This may very well be accompanied by a decreased appreciation of commercials containing English.

Although it is tempting to do so, the results of our study of Dutch subjects' comprehension of and attitudes toward English in commercials cannot automatically be extrapolated to other European countries where English is not the main language of communication. Within Europe, there is wide variation in the population's knowledge of English. According to Eurodata figures from 1990, 73 percent of the Dutch and Swedish populations understand English, as opposed to only 12 percent of the Spanish population. Moreover, unlike in many other European countries, English-language television programs are not dubbed but subtitled in the Netherlands. Because there are many such English-language TV programs the viewers' exposure to English on TV is quite high in the Netherlands compared to other European countries (Blockmans, 1998). This may mean that in other European countries English in commercials is understood even less well than in the Netherlands. Since our study found a link between comprehension and attitude, it is to be expected that viewers' attitudes toward English in commercials in other Eu-

ropean countries is not very favorable either. Taking an even broader perspective, in the light of research into the effect of Spanish advertisements in the Hispanic community in the United States (Koslow, Shamdanasi, and Touchstone, 1994; Roslow and Nicholls, 1996), commercials may be expected to be most successful when the language they use is the language of the country in which they are broadcast. However, more research is needed to test these assumptions and to see whether global advertising requires not only cultural adaptations (cf. De Mooij, 1994, 1998; Zandpour et al., 1994) but also linguistic adaptations. **JAR**

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