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Advertising as a space of plurilingual interaction and intercultural learning

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the use of advertising in order to develop Spanish students' plurilingual competence and linguistic attitudes associated to the use of languages in advertising. The point of departure is the analysis of two teaching-learning experiences with Spanish university students forwarded to practice plurilingual exposure through the intercomprehension approach to language learning (Hidalgo Downing & Vela Delfa 2011). Through the analysis of the two experiences, we examine the degrees of lexical comprehension, the importance of paratext in textual schemata processings and the learners' expression of values and attitudes associated to languages.

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1. Introduction

The combination of different languages is a widely used resource in today's advertising discourse. It entails the exploitation of certain connotative values given to the advertised products (Esteba Ramos, 2010).

In general, the languages used in advertisements share some degree of transparency, either by kinship or cultural closeness. In the case of Spain, French and Italian are frequently used. But also English is resorted to: though not a Romance language, it is assumed to be known among young people or learned professionals. With less accessible languages, like German, lexical transparency is used, or some kind of support strategy is included, such as subtitles.

This persuasive strategy makes advertising discourse a space of plurilingual interaction, which reflects an increasingly globalized communicative context where a wide group of speakers are allowed to experience indirect linguistic learning through intercomprehension. For that reason, advertising discourse provides an excellent opportunity to outline new approaches towards intercomprehension, both for language learners and students of other disciplines (advertising, tourism or information sciences, for example).

Advertising is a very effective resource for language didactics, offering contextualized language samples with great significant value (Robles Ávila, 2002). Specifically, the use of different languages in advertising is associated with the activation of certain cultural stereotypes (Griera Pons, 2010). Therefore, samples of advertising discourse are highly effective to assess metacultural and intercultural notions and, more specifically, to address attitudes and beliefs towards languages.

Linguistic attitudes involve all the subjective assessments that speakers make of linguistic varieties and languages. These are integrated with the rest of the individual's beliefs to define their linguistic identity. Sociolinguistics has shown interest in the study of linguistic attitudes, regarding variety preferences, variation, or the status of different languages within contexts of diglossia or language contact (González Martínez 2008), but also concerning foreign languages teaching, where linguistic attitudes act as an affective filter between learners and the new language, operating through the mental representations of their mother tongue, the target language and the learning process itself. In the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), the attitudinal component, including the complete set of the learner's beliefs, attitudes and personality traits, is highly important for the foundations of the learning process (Vela Delfa, 2013).

In this work, we present two teaching experiences which, from an intercultural perspective, involve two types of learners: 1) those coming from non-linguistic disciplines, particularly Advertising university students, and 2) students specializing in applied languages. From this experience we aim to reflect on teaching through intercomprehension in new scenarios, aiming to stimulate language learning and awareness in addition to language use and values.

2. Advertising students' awareness of linguistic diversity

The first experience was carried out with a group of students who were taking a course in Introduction to Language and Linguistics as part of their Degree in Advertising, during 2013-2014. The main objective of the activity was to reflect on the use of foreign languages in audiovisual advertising on the basis of two secondary aims: 1) discovering the extent of use of the discursive strategy of code-mixing, and 2) understanding the persuasive mechanisms underlying these processes. With this in mind, the activity started with a brief introduction; here, the main focus was not on linguistic learning, but on identifying and becoming aware of the uses of the languages we are exposed to. The initiative was articulated in two steps: (i) a task based on collecting, identifying and analyzing plurilingual advertising products, and (ii) reflecting on the linguistic attitudes and beliefs exploited in them.

In order to address the first phase, the following microtasks were proposed:

- 1) Presenting the phenomena of code-switching and code-mixing through some exemplifying advertisements.
- 2) Collecting a corpus or sample of code-switching ads, from the *publitv.com* repository (currently *publi.pro*).
- 3) Classifying the samples, following two parameters: 1) the type of plurilingual strategy employed, and 2) the type of products advertised.
- 4) Conducting a questionnaire focused on identifying form and meaning.

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