



Code-breaking/code-making: A new language approach in advertising

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to study the mixing of languages in the advertising campaigns of the Spanish airline company Vueling. The main hypothesis is that foreign languages are used in this context for their symbolic and visual value rather than their content or informational components. The theoretical frame of multilingual advertising for the analysis is the linguistic fetishism approach proposed by Kelly-Holmes (2005). The data analysis will be carried out in two stages and will apply two different but related models of analysis. First, I will show how these ads break syntactic patterns of codeswitching according to the Matrix Language Frame model by Myers-Scotton (1992, 1993, 1995, 2001, 2002). Second, by applying the syntactic categories of codeswitching in Poplack (1982), I will explain how this company creates a new form of codeswitching in advertising very different from previous code-mixed ads in the general market and particularly in Spain. The results of the analysis confirm the hypothesis that symbolism is the driving force in using foreign languages in Vueling campaigns: English, French and Italian are inserted within Spanish idioms and proverbs to convey 'foreignness' rather than information. This pattern of 'domesticating' foreign elements into local semantic and syntactic frames suggests a desire to globalize or at least 'Europeanize' Spanish ads within the airlines market while maintaining and reinforcing Spanish identity.

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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been increasing interest in the use of foreign languages in advertising, especially the use of English in non-Anglophone countries such as France (Martin, 2002, 2006), Belgium (Van Gijzel et al., 2008), Russia (Ustinova and Bhatia, 2005), Germany (Piller, 2001; Einbeck, 2004), Ecuador (Ovesdotter, 2003) Brazil (Friedrich, 2002), or Korea (Jung, 2001; Lee, 2006), to mention a few. All these cases of multilingual advertising share three characteristics. First of all, English is the only foreign language used. Second, the English language is introduced in the non-English ads mainly through brand names, slogans, proper names, and words or phrases. Third, the role of English in these code-mixed ads is associated with values such as modernity (Atkinson and Kelly-Holmes, 2006; Lee, 2006; Gerritsen et al., 2007), progress (Piller, 2003), youth (Van Gijzel et al., 2008), and a gate-keeping function in the labor market (Ovesdotter, 2003).

In the present study, I analyze the case of the Spanish airline company Vueling, whose advertising involves code-mixing (hereafter CM) of languages that are not used in normal everyday communication in the sociolinguistic context of Spain. Vueling is a new generation, low-fare airline company based in Barcelona (Spain), which started its business in May 2004. Its signature feature is a new communication style, very different from what other Spanish airline companies have ever done: colloquial, casual, young, fresh. This communication style is reflected in every aspect of the company: website, advertising

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campaigns, check-in counters, planes, and crew. One example is that flight attendants address passengers as *tú* (second person singular, informal, and personal), instead of *usted* (second person singular, formal and distant) saying things like: “Recuerda abrocharte el cinturón de seguridad” instead of the traditional: “Recuerden abrocharse su cinturón de seguridad” (“Please, remember to fasten your seat belts”). Likewise, crew members introduce themselves by giving their first names and birthplaces to make the flight experience personal and intimate for the passenger: “En este vuelo, te atenderemos en la parte de delante Aitor, de Bilbao y María de Valladolid y, en la parte de atrás, Carmen de Madrid y Francois, de París” (“On this flight, you will have Aitor from Bilbao and Maria from Valladolid in the front to assist you and, in the back, Carmen from Madrid and Francois from Paris.”).

The case of Vueling constitutes an example of multilingual communication in advertising as defined by Kelly-Holmes: “the appearance of a number of languages or voices in a market-discourse situation” (2005:10). This author does not limit her notion of bilingual or multilingual advertising to a particular speech act, but she extends her analysis to wider contextual frames. Accordingly, in this study, Vueling ad campaigns are conceptualized as a phenomenon of multilingual advertising communication since they take place in different media (radio, newspapers, buses, airports, subway stations, and Internet sites) and manifest themselves in different ways ranging from mixing languages within Spanish idioms (*Volará hasta le cat*¹) to the manner in which flight attendants and pilots address passengers (*Buen Vueling*²).

Although the case of Vueling is another example of multilingual advertising, it is different from previous studies on this topic in the three aspects presented earlier. First, Vueling advertising campaigns involve mixing foreign languages other than English such as in “*Gana le golden billete*”³ in which you find Spanish (*gana, billete*), English (*golden*), and French (*le*) in the same sentence. Second, unlike previous studies (Piller, 2001; Einbeck, 2004; Gerritsen et al., 2007; Martin, 2002) in which foreign languages are introduced mainly through content words such as nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs, Vueling introduces foreign languages not only as content words but also as linking words and, most interestingly, as morphemes within lexemes. For example, they embed an English suffix into a Spanish lexeme as in their very own brand name, Vueling (*vuel-* is a Spanish lexeme that means ‘to fly’). Third, and most important, I will show later that the insertion of foreign languages in the case of Vueling does not seem to be associated with social or affective values, but rather with symbolic and visual aspects.

Hence, the purpose of this study is to confirm the hypothesis that the use of foreign languages in Vueling is driven by symbolism rather than information or content (Kelly-Holmes, 2005). In order to prove this hypothesis, I analyze the syntactic structures in which foreign elements are embedded in terms of the structural principles of codeswitching (not merely in sociopragmatic aspects) in order to draw conclusions regarding the symbolic vs. informational role of the foreign languages inserted. Toward that aim, I will be using two models of analysis: Myers-Scotton’s Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model and Poplack’s taxonomy of codeswitching syntactic categories. These two approaches explain codeswitching from a structural point of view since both consider the nature of this phenomenon to be rule-governed. Whereas the MLF model will be used to explain how Vueling ads deviate from codeswitching structural principles (code-breaking), Poplack’s taxonomy will be applied to our corpus to identify the types of codeswitching that Vueling ads create (code-making).

The corpus for analysis consists of four Vueling advertising campaigns: the first two campaigns (2004 and 2005) and the last two (2007 and 2008). Most of Vueling’s campaigns have been designed by the advertising agency SCPF in Barcelona though some ads have been created by other agencies or freelancers. For the sake of cohesion, in this study I have used only the graphic advertisements designed and created by SCPF for newspapers, airports, subway stations, and buses. The agency provided me with 23 ads for the campaign of 2004, 33 ads for 2005, 31 for 2007, and 30 for 2008. The advertising agency only had 6 ads designed in-house for the 2006 campaign, and for that reason it has not been included in this work. Thus, in total I analyzed 117 advertisements, each of them featuring several clouds talking to each other in different languages and using different types of CM (see Fig. 1).

2. The linguistic fetishism approach

The theoretical model of code-mixed advertising around which this study is framed is the linguistic fetishism approach proposed and developed by Kelly-Holmes (2005). This approach is based on Marxist ideas about the culture of consumption and the value of commodities in capitalist societies. According to Marx, capitalists ignore the social relations and labor conditions under which commodities are produced. Instead, capitalists “fetishize” commodities by assigning them a symbolic value rather than appreciating the utility or use value commodities contain. Kelly-Holmes (2005) applies Marx’s views to the use of foreign languages in advertising by claiming that the use-value of languages, that is, their referential function, has been obscured or mystified by their symbolic value through the process of fetishization.

One consequence of linguistic fetishism in multilingual advertising is the notion of ‘fake multilingualism’ defended by Kelly-Holmes (2005:184) and based on the concept of ‘impersonal bilingualism’ first proposed by Harald Haarmann (1989). Haarmann claims that foreign languages in Japanese mass media are not used to address different speakers’ communities in Japanese society, but rather for their symbolic functions. For instance, English plays three main symbolic functions in Japan:

¹ This is a very colloquial expression in Spanish literally meaning “Even the cat will fly.” It is used when you mean that everybody did, do, or will do something. For example, in this case, it means that everybody will fly with Vueling (even the cat). In English there is an expression that is somewhat close but somewhat dated: “Every Tom, Dick, and Harry will fly.”

² “Have a nice flight.”

³ I use italics for the non-English words appearing in the ads for the sake of clarity. In Vueling ads, however, there are no italics and this is precisely a very interesting feature that will be discussed in section 5.

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