



Assessing the Language Use for Consumer Products

Sanjay Kumar Jha

Director and Professor (Amity School of Liberal Arts)

Amity University Gurgaon, Haryana, India

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Abstract

Despite the fact that India is a museum of 1721 languages as per the Census of India (2011), this study hypothesizes that English is still a dominant language to advertise consumer products in Indian market. In order to test this hypothesis, this longitudinal survey set two prime objectives: (i) assessing the degree of using English and other Indian languages on four major types (convenience, shopping, speciality, and unsought) of consumer products and (ii) understanding whether the languages used on consumer products influence customers in terms of buying or not buying a product. In attaining the aforementioned objectives, the study employed *direct observation* and *content analysis* as two primary data gathering tools; whereas, *unstructured interview* was also used as an additional tool for triangulation in order to test the validity of the findings. The subjects of the study were randomly-selected 100 consumer products and purposively-selected 50 respondents from rural and urban areas. As for data analysis, the study used descriptive statistics and analytic induction. The study revealed 24 striking facts and findings, seven of which are worth mentioning here. (i) English proved to be the most widely used language followed by Hindi not only for *logo* and *brand-caption* but also for *instruction-for-use* of the products as 83% of products used English; 15% used Hindi; whereas, languages like Urdu and other regional languages were used as translation of captions and logo for 2% consumer products. (ii) For the respondents from rural background, although, the use of English on a product entails that the product must be of good quality, language often becomes immaterial to them if the brand is famous. (iii) Devnagri is being replaced by Romnagri (Hindi written with Roman letter) for the brand-caption of a product. (iv) A sizable number (55%) of rural respondents wished to have their consumer products translated in local languages for better comprehension of the products. (v) Hindi, Urdu, and other Indian languages were used only on 5% of shopping products to specify *instruction-for-use*. (vi) Nearly, 12% of rural respondents stated that they purchased their convenience products by price rather than languages(s) used on them. (vii) Most of the popular spice brands like MDH, Everest, etc. and Ayurvedic products of Baba Ramdev and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar go multilingual.

Keywords- logo, brand-caption, instruction-for-use, branding, convenience, speciality, unsought, Romnagri

1. Introduction

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, it goes to his heart.”

Nelson Mandela

Although, the citation of the late former South African President stresses over the use of local languages, its significance and advantage ring true to the landscape of linguistic market in general and the world of consumer-products’ branding in particular. To emphasize the localization of consumer products, it is imperative to cite here the results of an opinion poll that was carried out in 10 countries with 3002 customers by Common Sense Advisory, an independent market research firm. The poll result revealed that more local language content leads to a greater likelihood of purchase of the products (Mayflower, 2015). Conversely, India is a country where the Indian business world conducts its affairs mainly in English according to international translation agency Kwintessential (Smith, 2014). Though, it may sound a good news for the multinational companies, it poses a potential threat to the promotion and preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity of the country, especially in promoting regional languages or the languages that are on the verge of becoming extinct. Of the total population in India, only 25 % of urban population has satisfactory proficiency in English. As growth in first-tier cities slows down, one needs to understand the rural and suburban consumer better and cater accordingly (Hegde, 2016).

Unlike yesteryears, today we are blessed with several media like print, radio, television, Internet, and many android based apps not only to advertise a product but more importantly to buy a product. Although, we have multilingual customer care centers, we are still deprived of multilingual translations of necessary information on a consumer product as translation and localization in India have simply stopped at the marketing stage (Hegde, 2016).

Given the current scenario in which English seems to be emerging as the market lingua franca for advertisers, manufacturers, and consumers in India, this study hypothesizes that English is the most widely used language in Indian market not only to advertise but more importantly to brand a consumer product in terms of its trade mark (logo), brand-caption, and instruction-for-use. In order to test the hypothesis, this study set the following two objectives:

1.1 Objectives of the Study

- 1) Assessing the degree of using English and other Indian languages on four major types (convenience, shopping, speciality, and unsought) of consumer products
- 2) Understanding whether the languages used on consumer products influence consumers in terms of buying or not buying a product.

To attain the aforementioned objectives, the study poses two pertinent research questions below.

1.2 Questions of the Study

- 1) What is the degree of using English, Hindi, and other Indian languages on consumer products?
- 2) Do the languages used on consumer products influence consumers in terms of consumerism?

1.2 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for three main reasons. Firstly, this study is a pioneering attempt to divulge the mindset of Indian consumers towards linguistic means of branding a product. Secondly, the study presents an overview of how and why English has come to be a dominant language of branding and advertising. Thirdly, the study elicits the perceptions of the rural and urban respondents towards language policy for advertising and branding.

1.3 Limitations of the Study

Since the survey of consumer products was conducted in five shopping malls of Gurgaon and Bhiwadi districts of Haryana state, the findings of this study lack representativeness and generalization to the products of other states.

1.4 Operational Definitions of the Terms

Consumerism: The term consumerism here refers to the state of mind in which a consumer is evoked to buy or not to buy a product by the face value, especially, by the languages used on the product.

Logo: Logo has been used here to refer to the trade mark on a product which comprises a symbol and associated language to advertise the product.

Brand Caption: It refers to the promotional statement used to catch attention of consumers.

Instruction-for-use: It refers to the necessary specifications written on a product in terms of its utility.

Branding: In the present study, branding refers to the languages used for the logo, caption, instruction, and advertisement of a product holistically. The process of branding is very important as it can make or mar the marketing strategy of a product.

2. Literature Review

Given the novelty of the research topic, there is a great dearth of adequate literature to be reviewed as very few researchers have shed light on the topic under discussion. It is imperative to mention that neither the field of advertising nor the field of marketing has touched upon the current topic of assessing the degree of using English and other Indians languages on consumer products in Indian scenario. However, this section inculcates a theoretical premise within which the aforementioned research questions could be addressed with appropriate rationales, hypotheses, and supportive ideas. Some of the literature selected for the review in pertinence to the current study are “Understanding India's culture is key for business” by Smith (2014), “The Conflict between a Strong Brand and Local Language” by Mayflower (2015), “Language as a Consumer Right in India”, by Hegde (2016), “Advertising & Marketing in Rural India”: Language, Culture, and Communication” by Bhatia (2007), “Global Marketing Guides: India | United Language Group”, by Norvet (2016), “The Potential and Benefits of Language Localization in India” by Recalde (2016), to mention a few.

The great linguistic diversity of India, popularly known as the museum of languages with 1721 languages (Census, 2011), has made it seemingly difficult for both: Indian and multinational companies to penetrate Indian market. The Constitution of India, in its Eighth Schedule, has identified 22 official languages written in 11 different scripts. Now, if we look at

the use of these languages on consumer products, we find that packaging and labelling regulation in India permits English and/or Hindi mandatorily. To promote Hindi and regional languages on consumer products, the HRD ministry suggested that all goods and products sold in the country, irrespective of where they have been manufactured, may soon have labels and instructions in Hindi and another regional language (Chopra, 2016).

While promoting a consumer product, a manufacturer confronts with a pair of dualities, namely: localization and globalization of the product. Although, the need of using English language in Indian market is more intensified as globalization is the agenda of the time, several multinational companies have started localizing their products using local lingo.

In the pursuit of localizing a product, the world of advertising in India has caused a kind of linguistic unrest not only by using Hinglish abundantly in the form of code mixing on TV and Social Media such as *Yeh Dil Mange More*, *Yeh hi hai right choice baby*, *Dil Ki Deal* etc. to mention a few, but more seriously, it has put the sanctity of Hindi script by using Roman script for Hindi words and phrases in place of using Devnagri. The first image below is an example of Hinglish; whereas, the second is the example of Romnagri used by Indian FMCG and multinational companies.



If Indian consumers continue to be tempted to accepting English, Hinglish, or Romnagri as marketing lingua franca of India, it would flagrantly contravene the Indian interest and adversely affect Indian culture and identity. Notwithstanding, the debate on the language use remains open from sociolinguistic perspective.

Quality language localization is not just translating the content of a mobile application or website to a new language; it involves taking into account the idiosyncratic social and cultural nuances and sensitivities that help the consumer feel safe and secure with using or buying the business product or service. Therefore, India, which is rich in regions, dialects, states and cultures, necessitates localization because not every Indian individual is comfortable using English (Mayflower, 2015).

Out of 1.25 billion Indian population, about 200 million are proficient in English and 43 percent of the people residing in rural India say that they would readily adopt the internet if it

had content in their local language. It makes MNCs look up and take notice when deciding their branding strategy in a country like India (Mayflower, 2015). To this end, all the big players in the field of e-commerce like Flipkart, Jabong and Snapdeal have already begun to launch their entire websites and even apps in local languages such as Tamil, Marathi, Hindi as well as all forms of vernacular media to cater to the regional populations (ibid).

For instance, Amazon went from “Try Toh Kar” (Hindi for “At least try it”) to “Namma Angadi” (Kannada for “Our store”) after scores of tweets and comments on its Facebook page made it see that transliterated Hindi ads and tag lines just wouldn’t cut it in Bengaluru. A few important trends in the consumer sector which are likely to have a significant impact on consumer behaviour and consumption going forward is the emerging preference for ayurvedic, herbal and natural products which is gaining momentum. (Bhushan, 2016). The development at Amazon is in line with what executives from online advertising companies have observed happening: display-only channels like banners and ecommerce will be among the first to be localized (Hegde, 2016).

To see the impact of the suggestion made by the HRD ministry, this study made a direct observation of 100 products of four major genres, namely: *convenience*, *speciality*, *shopping*, and *unsought*) to know which language(s) do they use for logo, brand, and instructions. It is imperative to give a brief account of all the four types of consumer products as follows.

Convenience product is a consumer product that customers purchase regularly and frequently. Convenience product includes mostly household items like hand soap, laundry detergents, food, magazines, sugar, toothpaste, and personal care products. Speciality product is a consumer product for which customers are more selective and as a result such a product has comparatively high price. Speciality products include items like high-end luxury automobiles, Rolls-Royce cars, photographic equipment, Rolex watches, expensive champagne, etc. In comparison with convenience product, shopping product is purchased less frequently partly because buyers are more concerned about their psychological benefits as it is more expensive. Such a product includes items like briefcases, clothing products, personal services, electronic products, and household furnishings. Unsought products are those products whose purchase is unplanned. Unsought products include items like life insurance, prepared funeral services, thesaurus, etc. (Claessens, 2015).

3. Methodology

For this study, a mixed research design (qualitative and quantitative) was adopted as the first research question required gathering quantitative data; whereas the second research question required gathering qualitative data.

3.1 Subjects and sampling of the Study

The subjects in this study were of two types: product and respondent. For the first type, 100 consumer products of four major genres, namely: convenience, shopping, speciality, and unsought products were selected through random sampling; whereas, 50 respondents from rural and urban backgrounds were selected through purposive sampling.

3.2 Methods of Data Collection

The study used *direct observation* and *content analysis* as two primary data gathering tools. The third data gathering tool namely *unstructured interview* was also used primarily as triangulation

tool to validate the findings elicited from *direct observation* and *content analysis* and secondarily, to respond to the second research question as it allows the respondents to answer freely and the researcher to probe and explore the exact and related facts as they came up during the interview.

3.3 Methods of Data Analysis

The study used descriptive statistics to analyse quantitative data gathered in response to the first research question; whereas, qualitative data gathered in response to the second research question were analysed using analytic induction as well as descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics used only percentile scale to show the degree of languages used on the consumer products; whereas, analytic induction was used to accurately present the reality of the situation by thematically categorizing and interpreting the responses of the respondents in descending order of prominence, emphasis, and relativity of their perceptions towards languages used on the products.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the findings under two distinct segments. The first segment (4.1), firstly, presents the statistical figure of using English and Indian languages on four major types of consumer products, namely: *convenience*, *speciality*, *shopping*, and *unsought* in terms of percentage; secondly, it also presents the degree of using English and Indian languages for three distinct variables, namely: *logo*, *brand-caption*, and *instructions*. The second segment (4.2) presents the narrative viewpoints (elicited through unstructured interview) of the respondents as to their perceptions towards use of language on any product.

4.1 The Degree of Using English and Indian Languages on Consumer Products

In response to the first research question, the researcher took front and back side photos of 100 consumer products in order to see what language(s) were used for three distinct variables: *logo*, *brand-caption*, and *instructions* for the products. Before we see the degree of language use for the stated three variables, it is desirable to see the degree of using different languages for four types of consumer products.

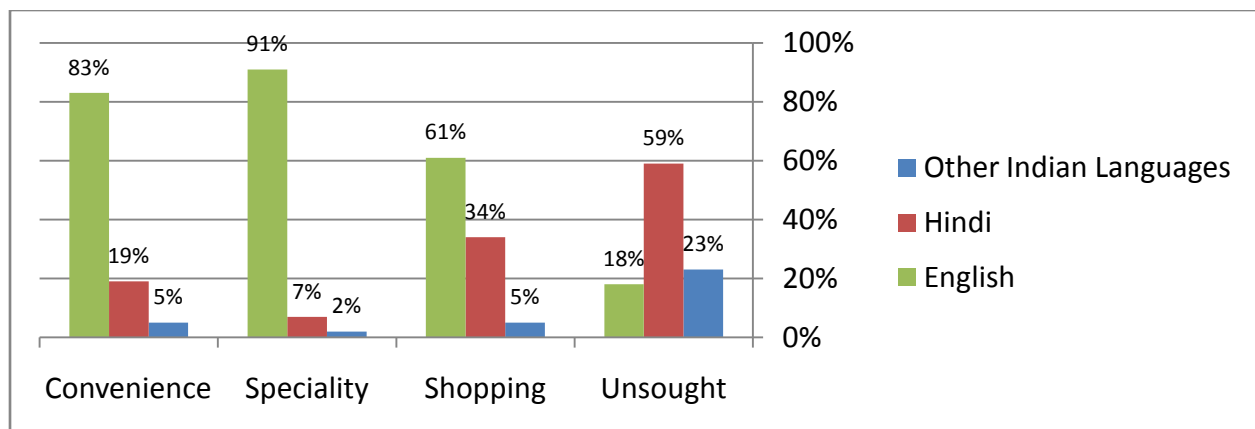


Figure 1: The Degree of Using English and Other Indian Languages

Analyzing the bar chart (Fig. 1), seven striking facts surfaced related to the degree of language use.

1. English proved to be the most widely used language followed by Hindi not only for logo and brand-caption but also for instructions as 83% of convenience products used English, 19% used Hindi; whereas, languages like Urdu and other regional languages were used as translation of captions and brands by 5% convenience products. This finding also goes in line with that of Chopra (2016) who found in her study that currently, most products sold in India carry labels and instructions only in English.
2. Natural products of Baba Ram Dev, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, and other indigenous and Ayurvedic products go bilingual by using English and Hindi to show *instructions-for-use* of the products.
3. Most of the popular spice brands like MDH, Everest, etc. go multilingual to advertise their products.
4. Cosmetic products use necessarily English for logo and specifications.
5. It was also found that English is emerging as the sole marketing and advertising lingua franca in Indian market.
6. Almost all the FMCG companies and the advertisers use English as well as Romnagri to meet the purpose of localization and more importantly globalization of the product.
7. Manufacturing date and Expiry date are always given in English.

4.1.1 The Degree of Language Use for Logo, Brand-caption, and Instructions for Use

Subsequent to the elicited findings on the degree of using languages, it is imperative to mention here the degree of language use for three distinct variables, namely: logo, brand-caption, and instruction-for-use.

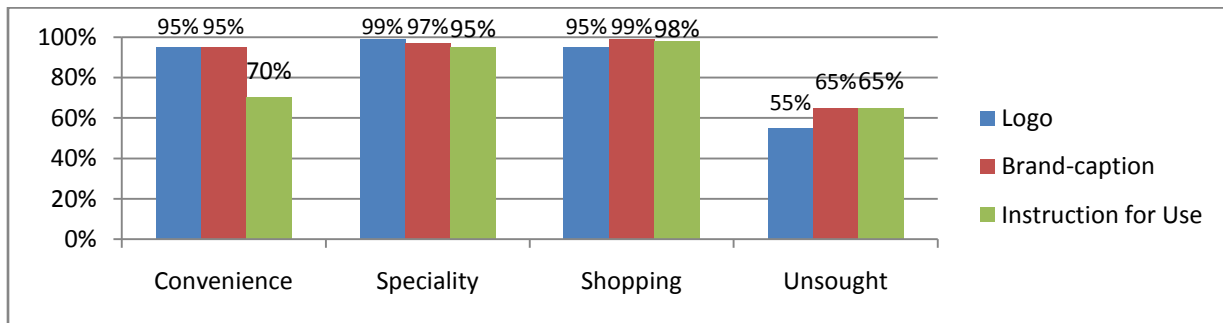


Figure 2: The Degree of Using English for Logo, Brand-caption, and Instructions

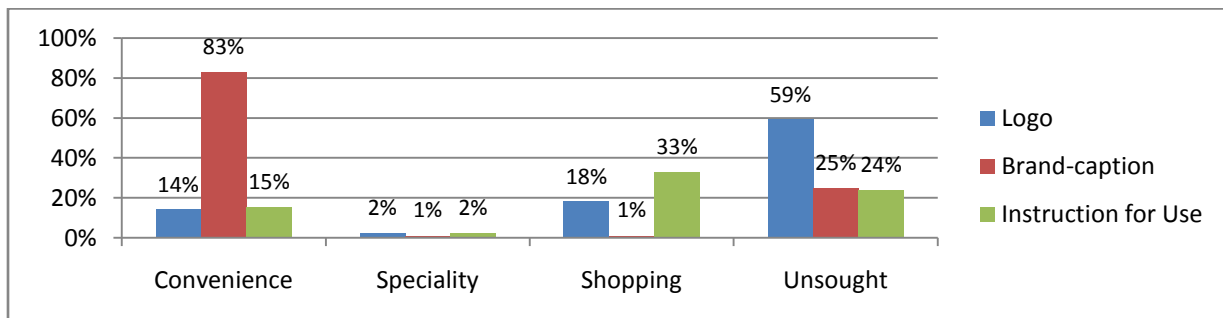


Figure 3: The Degree of Using Hindi/E-Nagri for Logo, Brand-caption, and Instructions

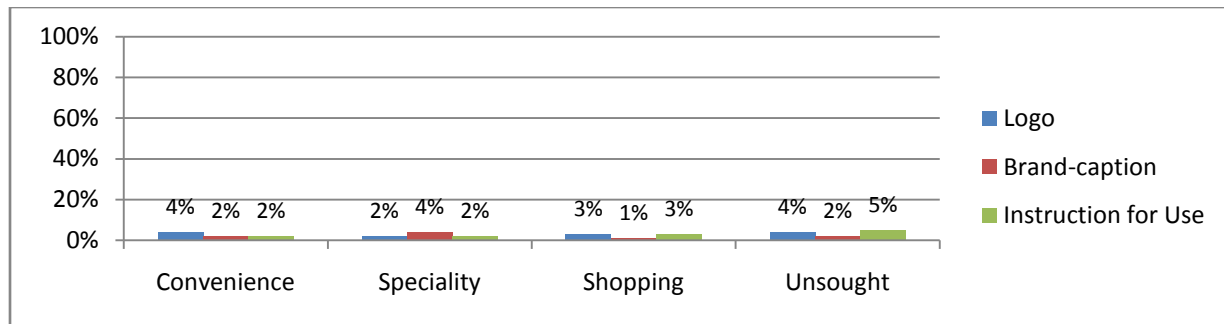


Figure 4: The Degree of Using Other Indian Languages for Logo, Brand-caption, and Instructions

Analyzing the bar charts (Fig. 2, Fig. 3, and Fig. 4), the study explored seven striking facts related to the degree of language use for logo, brand-caption, and instruction-for-use of the products as follows.

1. It is noteworthy in Fig. 2 that the degrees of English language used for logo in convenience, speciality, shopping, and unsought products are 95%, 99%, 95%, and 55% respectively; whereas, the degrees of English language used for brand-captions of the same products are 95%, 97%, 99%, and 65% respectively.
2. The degrees of English language used for *instruction-for-use* are 70%, 95%, 98%, and 65% respectively which implies that English is again a dominant language when it comes to write *instruction-for-use* as average 82% products were found with *instruction-for-use* written in English.
3. It is noteworthy in Fig. 3 that the degrees of Hindi language used for logo in convenience, speciality, shopping, and unsought products are 14%, 2%, 18%, and 59% respectively; whereas, the degrees of Hindi used for brand-captions are 83%, 1%, 1%, and 25% respectively.
4. The degrees of Hindi language used for *instruction-for-use* are 15%, 33%, and 24% respectively except that of speciality product in which Hindi was used only on 2% products.
5. Fig. 4 shows the average percentage of the degrees of using other (regional/local) languages for *logo*, *brand-caption*, and *instruction* as 4%, 3%, and 3% which are almost negligible to be considered.
6. English (Roman Letter) prevails even in writing any Hindi brand name. Such an approach of writing Hindi using English/Roman letter has been termed as *Romnagri*. The use of *Romnagri* poses a threat to the use of Devnagri Lipi.
7. Hindi, Urdu, and other Indian languages were used only on 5% of shopping products to specify *instruction-for-use*.

4.2 Perceptions of Respondents towards Languages Used on Consumer Products

As for the perceptions of respondents towards languages used on consumer products, the study employed *unstructured interview* as the third data gathering tool to triangulate and validate the findings drawn through direct observation and content analysis. The following are ten key findings as to respondents' perceptions about language use.

1. Almost all the rural respondents admitted that the use of English on any consumer product had evoked not only a fancy for the product but also implied that the product is of good quality.
2. English proved to be the second mother tongue for the urban respondents and thereby having a strong liking for the consumer products whose *logos*, *brand-captions*, and *instructions* are written in English.
3. On the one hand, 65% of the rural respondents (though prosperous) showed a kind of fancy for buying English brand products to enhance their social identity; on the other, about 35% of rural respondents were found unconcerned about language(s) used on the products. They were more concerned about the popularity of brand. If the brand is famous, language becomes immaterial to them.
4. Nearly, 12% of rural respondents stated that they purchased their convenience products by price rather than languages(s) used on them.
5. A sizable number (55%) of rural respondents wished to have their consumer products translated in local languages for better comprehension of the products.
6. 35% of rural respondents were of the opinion that they love buying a product whose specifications are written primarily in their own languages or secondarily in Hindi as they find it easier to grasp branding of the products.
7. To understand the utility of a product, all the rural respondents voiced for multilingual translation of key specifications of the products.
8. It is an irony that many multinational companies still harbour a misconception that translation in India starts and ends with Hindi. They profess doubts about the purchasing power of the non-English, non-Hindi Indian buyer, but for the most part, these doubts are self-fulfilling prophecies (Hegde, 2016).
9. Online archival data suggest that companies like Dabur, Patanjali, and that of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar are increasing their market share under key consumer categories due to multilingualism of their products.
10. As for the quality of daily use products, Ayurvedic products especially of Baba Ramdev, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, and Dabur have become a buzzword among urban as well as rural respondents.

5. Conclusion

In its endeavor to answer two research questions, the paper presents 24 key findings under the headings 4.1, 4.1.1, and 4.2 respectively. Summarizing the findings, it goes without saying that English continues to be the most dominating language in the consumer market of India. Although, the need of using English language in Indian market is more intensified as globalization is the agenda of the time, the future of using indigenous languages like Hindi, Urdu, and others on consumer products is very bleak as Romnagri tends to supersede Devnagri.

It is noteworthy that India is a multilingual country where a person is blessed with not just one mother tongue rather two and sometimes three mother tongues as it is difficult to distinguish which mother tongue should be L1, L2, or L3 as many urban children are endowed with equal linguistic proficiency in up to three languages. In the same vein, from remedial perspective, Indian consumers need to adopt trilingual policy (as proposed by the HRD ministry) of promoting English, Hindi, and State language on all the products (Chopra, 2014).

To sum up, the time is ripe for the Indian consumers to move on with English by simultaneously preserving the linguistic sanctity of the native languages not only for socio-economic growth but also for socio-linguistic growth of the country. The following are some of the recommendations to ensure both socio-economic and socio-linguistic growth of the country.

5.1 Recommendations

1. To create employment opportunity for translators, a three language policy (Global+National+Local) ought to be enforced for the branding of any consumer product.
2. All the pharma, cosmetic, and food products must write instruction-for-use in one local language for better comprehension and utility of the products.
3. All the user guides of speciality and unsought products must be trilingual.
4. To strike a balance between localization and globalization, a midway solution needs to be explored to use adequate and appropriate quantum of multilingual information on a product.
5. As 75 % of India lives in villages and the growth of first-tier cities slows down, all the multinational and FMCG companies need to understand the rural and suburban consumer better and cater consumer products accordingly.

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