

# Punctuation as a Typographical Solution in the Designing of Multilingual Print Advertising/Marketing Messages: a Study of Nigerian Food Packages

Endong, Floribert Patrick Calvin<sup>#1</sup>, Vareba, Anthony Leva<sup>\*2</sup>

<sup>#</sup>Department of Theatre and Media Studies, University of Calabar  
PMB 1115, CRS, Calabar-Nigeria

<sup>\*</sup>River State Polytechnic, Bori River State, Nigeria

## Abstract

*Setting a multilingual text on a package with reduced space is often a complex and very challenging task. To surmount such a complexity and challenge, designers often employ a variety of techniques including (i) partial translation or translation by simplification (of information on package) and (ii) typographical solutions including typeface, point size, spacing, coloring, box drawing and punctuation marks. As a typographical solution or reader device, the use of punctuation marks permits the designers to maximize space in setting much text. Despite their relevance in such a difficult and unique situation, punctuation marks have the disadvantage of rendering the multilingual text relatively compact and often less readable as the different versions of the advertising/marketing message often appear somewhat merged, with text clustered in blocs. With such an approach to designing multilingual text or package, it is often difficult for the user (of the product) to easily spot the version destined to him/her and practically gather the message provided. This paper attempts to demonstrate this situation. It evaluates the effectiveness of the use of punctuation in the designing of multilingual packages by Nigerian manufacturers, based on two methods including a content analysis of a dozen packages made in Nigeria and a series of focus group discussions with both bilingual and unilingual (expatriate) users of these packages.*

**Keywords** —Multilingual Text, Package Design, Punctuation Markers, Typographical Solution, Translation by Simplification.

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the advent of globalization, multilingualism has become a buzzword and an imperative in the designing of international communication including advertising and marketing communications. In effect, designing for a global or international (heterogeneous) audience or market implies taking into consideration a wide range of factors including cultural and linguistic diversity, as

well as other cardinal elements of communication. In tandem with this, Hudson closely associates contemporary typographical design with the “internationalization” of information technology [1, p.36]. Going from this premise, he notes that, being directly implied in the economic, social and cultural development of globalization, typeface designers strongly assume a specific and relatively vital responsibility for communication to be successful. Contemporary designers are therefore more and more confronted with multilingual text designing given the fact that most firms tend to target an international market. In line with this, Balius contends that today, languages represent the first barrier manufacturers and marketers (and by extension package designers) encounter when they have to communicate with or relate to other cultural realities. Unilingual marketing communication is virtually insufficient nowadays. In effect, the prevailing economic globalization has compelled marketers to treat international markets with respect. So, if a product hopes to successfully survive competition and the realities of local markets, “it must position itself respecting local idiosyncrasies, just as any expression that aspires to be cultural [...] and hopes to transcend its local context will have to address multilingualism as a true necessity” [2, p.32]. The above observation is true to Nigerian manufacturers that increasingly target various (international) markets – particularly in the Francophone (French speaking) African countries within the ECOWAS sub-region – and are consequently compelled to embark on multilingual advertising and marketing communication or campaigns. These multilingual advertising/marketing campaigns include the production of bi/multilingual packages.

However, setting a multilingual package is often a complex and very tasking exercise, especially when the package offers a very reduced space. To surmount the challenge of reduced space, designers often have to mobilize a variety of relevant techniques including partial translation or translation by simplification (the act of providing simpler version of the message in source language) and a

wide range of typographical solutions (such as typeface, point size, coloring, boxing, and punctuation marks among others). These various techniques permit the designer to differentiate between the different versions of the message set on the package. They are systematically designed to permit each member of the linguistically heterogeneous readership/market to easily spot the message aimed at him/her. It has been argued that the use of punctuation as solution for setting multilingual text is very relevant in situation of reduced space. However, such a use is not always without serious repercussions on the readability of the textual content of the package and perception of the product (on promotion). This paper examines the effectiveness of the use of punctuation marks as a typographical solution in the setting of multilingual packages in Nigeria. It is centered on the following research questions:

- (i) To what extent do punctuation marks constitute a solution to typographical problems in the designing of packages with reduced space?
- (ii) Which punctuation marks are dominantly and circumstantially used in the designing of multilingual packages with a very reduced space?
- (iii) How readable are multilingual packages set with such punctuation marks?
- (iv) What are the effects of the use of such punctuation marks on the perception of both the product and the manufacturer?

## II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Punctuation is often regarded as an aspect of language use and textual construction. In the linguistic perspective, it is viewed as the marks employed to divide sentence and phrases in a context of writing or sentence formulation. It is equally viewed as the system governing the use of such marks. Effective punctuation seriously affects writing as it changes pace of reading, creates sentence complexity and variety, and eventually clarifies meaning. Conversely, improper use of punctuation may lead to clunky sentence formulation or somehow confusing sentences. Through systematic use of this communication tool, the encoder may completely change the meaning of his sentence and draw the attention of the reader on specific aspects of the message. Viewed from this angle, punctuation constitutes typographical symbols (sometimes including space), used to complement text, clarify meaning and facilitate the decoding of text.

However, in design, punctuation goes beyond mere textual features or typographical symbols, hence the common coinage of “visual punctuation”. As

Cousins insightfully remarks, in terms of typography or design, punctuation is more than just periods, brackets, exclamation points and the like. It is “anything that causes a reader or user to stop or pause. It can happen while reading text or as the eye moves from one element to another. These bits of visual punctuation are everywhere and are vital parts of any design concept” [3]. Elements of visual punctuation are therefore tools used by the designer “to separate, group or emphasize elements, photos or words within a design” and intentionally or “accidentally” cause the viewer/reader to stop and look at a certain part of the canvas or package. In line with this, two types of visual punctuation may be identified namely “classical” punctuation marks (including common readable punctuation markers – commas, square brackets, full stops and the like) and “conceptual”/“situational” punctuation including elements such as spaces, rule, color, lines and icons. The same as in writing and sentence formulation, punctuation in design, is used to clarify the meaning of text, as well as to facilitate reading comprehension by the users of the package. Some punctuation marks (notably commas, periods, dashes and colons) serve to visually divide text into phrases and sentences, thereby directly impacting, and sometimes significantly changing, the meaning and interpretation of such phrases and sentences. This indicates that an improper use of punctuation, may cause text in particular and the product package in general to be subjected to misinterpretations or concurrent interpretations.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

There exists a vast literature on the importance and effective use of typography in the designing of multilingual print communication. This section of our paper reviews literature particularly devoted to the importance of multilingualism in global marketing and package design and the different approaches to using punctuation in multilingual package design.

### A. *Multilingualism in Marketing and Package Design*

Multilingual communication could be defined as the use of two or more linguistic codes in one and the same communication context. It involves code switching/mixing in the delivery of the message. With close reference to advertising and marketing, Endong describes the phenomenon as the conception of information in various languages in one and the same marketing message. With reference to the Nigerian experience, he explains that the phenomenon (multilingual marketing approach) is viewed in the practice of conceiving information or selling messages in English and partially or fully translating them into two or multiple languages [4, p. 130]. These languages often include French, Portuguese, Arabic and Spanish [4, p.130].

Multilingualism has become so indispensable in today's global marketing industry as manufacturers increasingly target international markets and are consequently compelled to construct and shape their advertising/marketing messages and campaigns in a way as to easily reach linguistically heterogeneous pockets of consumers. This specific fact has caused a good number of scholars to associate multilingualism to the forces of economic globalization. Unilingual expression is today insufficient for manufacturers who target a global market and as Balius rightly puts it, "economic globalization compels us to treat markets with respect. So, if a product hopes to successfully survive, it must position itself respecting local idiosyncrasies, just as any expression that aspires to be cultural (a publishing product for instance) and hopes to transcend its local context will have to address multilingualism as a true necessity" [2, p. 32]. In line with this, manufacturers will, where necessary, need to translate their product packages into the language of the international market they target, to hope to be effective in their marketing campaigns.

The mobilization of multilingualism in marketing communication is therefore in line with the informational paradigm which is principally concerned with how easily consumer may understand and respond to information formulated in a specific language. The informational paradigm stipulates that, for the sake of effectiveness, marketing messages must be conceived or translated into the language of the consumer, and presented in a way as to be fully understood by him/her (the reader). Such a paradigm dictates that information provided in an official language (say English in Nigeria) may be ineffective if used to target ethnic sub-cultures which do not understand or resist it [5]. The idea behind multilingualism in marketing communication however goes beyond the information theory as it equally has symbolic and identity formation functions. These two functions are viewed in the fact that specific (foreign) languages are arguably considered to operate as "symbolic vectors of stereotyping and requisites for the representation of fixed images about native speakers of those languages" [4, p.132]. In line with this, a range of ethno-cultural stereotypes have often been associated with specific international languages and by extension with the native speakers of these languages. Marketers and product designers often mobilize the positive ethno-cultural stereotypes associated to native speakers of such languages in labeling the product they advertize. In tandem with this, French often conjure up images of elegance, sophistication, refinement and fashion, meanwhile Italian evokes association with tasty cuisine and 'sporty elegance'. Equally, German symbolizes originality, good quality, durability and prestige, meanwhile, Chinese is often (arguably) associated to flashiness and

cheapness [6, 7, p. 17]. Bulawka notes that such a use of linguistic symbolism "capitalizes on the positive stereotyping and has as its main goal, evoking favorable associations in the mind of the reader" [6].

Setting a multilingual text on product package is an art requiring a high degree of tact, expertise and forethought. Effective multilingual package design highly rests on the designer's ability to use typography and graphic to differentiate between the various versions (languages) of the message. Splitting the text appropriately in meaningful unit of information is the first step in this process. Such a splitting should be reasonably enough to permit translation into the different languages involved in the communication. According to Ishida, such a splitting should be informed by the fact that "linguistic differences between languages can lead to real headaches for localizers and may in some cases make reasonable translation impossible to achieve" [8]. The splitting of the text is also determined or eventually complicated by space. When space is reduced, the designer's task proves more difficult as it is unarguably titanic to set much text on package with very reduced space. As Sadek and Zhukov insightfully contend, "languages affect our vision of texts, their specific color and the amount of space we need for a given volume of text (its length)" [4, 9-10]. In addition to this, the differences between the letter characters used in the various languages make the task of the designer more complicated. Sadek and Zhukon illustrate this situation explaining that the Latin alphabet can present concurrent textures, based on the language employed for writing [4, 10]. Even so, variations in texture and color are much more evident when different writing systems are mobilized.

### ***B. Typography and Punctuation in Package Design***

Typography and visual images are the principal tools of product package designing. Typography is particularly fundamental in this practice as it is the element that makes writing legible and elegant, thereby facilitating effective communication. As it has abundantly been argued, a text is somewhat "in agony" when irrelevant or inappropriate typographical solutions are applied in the design. Nakilcioglu puts it beautifully when he notes that "the fundamental function of writing is to transfer thoughts and knowledge. During this communication, typography is the fundamental element [...] No matter how esthetically perfect the writing is, if it cannot be read, it cannot fulfill its fundamental function of 'transferring knowledge to its readers' [11, p. 52]. This observation is in accord with the postmodernist perspective in print message design, which is centered on Barthe's advocacy for the "Death" of the author (encoder) in favor of the "Birth" of the reader (decoder). Therefore, the postmodernist paradigm strongly makes a case for a

reader-based communication approach as it stipulates that “a piece of graphic design as well as art is incomplete until the reader interprets it” [12, p. 2]. Such a paradigm greatly departs from the modernist conception of typography which rejects the need for the designer or typographer to interpret literature, arguing that “literature can speak for itself”. According to the modernist school of thought, the typographer or designer should concentrate in making the text reader-friendly. However, some of the adepts of modernism (for instance Warde in Staniscia) endorse the idea of the designer being totally free to interpret and implement the copy in his own way, especially in marketing communication [12, p. 2-3]. Typography in such a context could facilitate the stressing of specific relevant parts of the advertising message and enable a greater visual impact on the public. Legibility is therefore a vital principle and objective in package design, whatsoever the school of thought considered. This objective or principle is easily reached or satisfied through careful and effective typography. Apart from satisfying the principle of legibility, the designer should equally set the package in a way that information will be spotted by the user as rapidly as possible. Design should be done in a way that the reader will be “able to read and understand the message carried to him/her as fast and as easily as possible” [11, p. 35]. This is naturally important in marketing as the product package should be able to attract and hold the attention of the consumer as well as give a positive image of the product at the sales point [13-14].

Effective and impactful use of typography rests on the use of such solutions as spacing, coloring, framing/box creation, font size and the like. In effect particular impact may be realized through the use of specific types or solutions. Font or type specification may for instance create denotative or connotative meanings. They may equally make meaning to be clearer or attract the attention of the reader on specific aspects of the text. In line with this, Nakilcioglu considers the selection of the most appropriate letter, type face and font size as the primary step of an intelligent text implementation [11, p. 47]. In the same line of argument, Hosteller notes that intelligent use of type face increases the expressive proprieties of a package.

*Each typeface has its own individual identity because of different proportions and a variety of line weights, widths, directional slants and so on. These individual qualities clearly determine that each typeface demonstrates a different use and purpose for expression. A well-combined variety of typefaces bring variations of expression and harmony to the design. Awareness of these classifications is an essential tool in developing a designer's ability to select an appropriate typeface that enhances the expressive message in typography. [15, p. 27]*

To maximize space, in situation of voluminous text implementation, a number of designers often resort to special techniques like visual punctuation. Visual punctuation as a technique in package design, consists in using classical punctuation markers – such as full stop/dot (.), slashes (/), square brackets ([]) or simple brackets among other – or contextual punctuation such as space, color, rules, lines, icons among others. Visual punctuation has the potentials to keep people looking at a design being engaged and prevents fatigue when reading or looking at a design. Providing ground for such a use of punctuation is very much in line with adapting communication to human behavior. In effect, natural pauses are part of human nature. Therefore, by punctuating print messages, the designer creates stops that occur at selected and appropriate places. When such a “work” is done, viewing a design can be easier and may require less effort or thought from the reader. Such a situation is vital in today’s busy world where making things easier for those looking at our designs is better [3]. Punctuation markers equally help add context and visual flow and make design easier for a user/reader to digest.

As has earlier been mentioned, designing a multilingual package entails crafty splitting of the text in meaningful units of information in order to facilitate translation. Such a splitting is often facilitated by classical/common punctuation marks. In effect, certain punctuation marks – such as slashes, (square) brackets, full stops, color and the like – help split voluminous multilingual text, creating visual impact aimed at differentiating the various languages. The use of this technique or approach is very often observed in the designing of multilingual/translated packages with very limited space, and is however, not without serious implications.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

Two methods of data collection were used in the present study notably a content analysis and two focus group discussions. The content analysis was quantitative and qualitative in nature. It sought to explore uses of punctuation marks as principal tool of language differentiation in a dozen of randomly sampled multilingual packages of food products made in Nigeria. The content analysis was particularly based on a corpus of 188 multilingual units of information contained in the sampled packages. The study considered individual blocks of information – revealing specific information about the proprieties, virtues and distribution of the products, as well as the expertise of the manufacturers – as units of analysis. Data were collected with the use of data sheet which considered four categories of punctuation marks (periods, (square) brackets, slashes and others) and three categories of units of information (namely (1) information on the products proprieties, virtues and



use mode, (2) information on the manufacturer's expertise and product distribution and (3) slogans and (sub)titles. The data collected were analyzed statistically and presented in tables 1 and 2 in the subsequent section of this article.

The study equally considered two focus group discussions as second method of data collection. The first focus group discussion involved 15 English speaking and the second, 14 French speaking discussants (expatriates) who are users of 8 out of the 12 product packages considered for the study. These 8 products included Golden Penny Spaghetti, Capri-Sonne Pineapple Drink, Freshyo, Homa Party Chips, All Sports Wafer, Annapurma Salt, Mr. Chef Salt and Golden Penny Sugar. The two focus group discussions aimed at examining the effectiveness of the multilingual packages. It sought to investigate the extent to which the use of common punctuation marks are instrumental in distinguishing a language from another, affecting the decoding of the blocks of information and the users' perception of the products (on promotion). These focus group discussions were based on the following questions:

- a) Which particular unit of information (slogan, (sub)title, product proprieties, virtues and distribution or information on manufacturer expertise) do you likely consult first, when you pick up or check a product at the sales point?
- b) How easy are your spotting of information in French/English on the packages considered for the study?
- c) What sense do you make of information presented in French/English on the packages?
- d) Does the package layout affect your perception of the product?

These questions were occasionally complemented with follow-up questions for clarification of concepts used during the discussion and to enable flow of exchange. The follow-up questions equally helped the researchers screen discussants' opinions during the discussions and facilitated the generation of relevant responses by the users.

## V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### A. Use of Punctuation in Nigerian Product Design

Findings reveal that punctuation marks are dominantly used to set information on product proprieties, virtues and mode of usage. The use of punctuation in such parts of the product packages amount to 46.80% followed by units of information on the manufacturer's expertise and product distribution (37.76%) and others (15.44%), as shown

in Table 1 below. Apart from the fact that they are generally heavily loaded with words, units of information describing product proprieties and virtues are generally the most translated [9-10]. Some of them contain versions in three or more languages, to be set in a relatively reduced space.

**Table 1: Unit of Information and Use of Punctuation**

Units of Information	n	%
Product proprieties, virtues and use mode	88	46.80
Manufacturers' expertise and product distribution	71	37.76
Slogan and (sub)titles	29	15.44
Total	188	100

Punctuation marks are therefore dominantly used in relatively less important components of the textual construction of packages. In effect, they are less used in sections such as (sub)titles and slogans which could be viewed as the most selling tools/components of the packages. It goes without saying that the titles and slogans presented on package are most often the most visible and attractive parts of the package. A viewer will likely – and rapidly – consult such parts at the sales point, as they are generally bolded and placed around the visual, another attractive component of most product packages. As shall be discussed in subsequent sections of this paper, potential consumers likely read titles and subtitles and visual at the sales point before other information on the product. Most consumers consult units of information on the product proprieties, virtues and mode use as well as those on the distribution of the product and manufacturer expertise secondarily, mostly when decision to buy the product is already made.

Findings equally reveal that slashes are the most used punctuation marks by Nigerian designers. Units of information punctuated with slashes have a percentage of 43.08, followed by those punctuated with brackets (22.87%) and periods (20.21%), as shown in Table 2 below. Compared to other forms of punctuation marks, slashes seem to have greater ability to split compact multilingual text into the various versions or languages constituting the message. While periods may give the impression that the different phrases or sentences are just successive components of the same paragraph, the slashes actually break the text, showing kinds of "demarcations" that could visually guide the reader in determining where a version ends and where another starts, in an horizontal gaze (a look from left to right). This could be seen in plates 1 and 2 presenting sections views of *Anapurma Salt* and *Golden Penny Spaghetti*.

**Table 2: Use of Punctuation on Nigerian Product Packages**

Unit of Information	Periods		Brackets		Slashes		Others		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
PPVU	18	20.45	9	10.22	54	61.36	7	7.97	88	100
MEPD	6	8.47	27	38.02	22	30.98	16	22.53	71	100
ST	14	48.27	7	24.13	5	17.24	3	10.36	29	100
Total	38	20.21	43	22.87	81	43.08	26	13.84	188	100

Key: PPVU: Product proprieties, virtues and use mode; MEPU: Manufacturer’s expertise and product distribution, ST: Slogan and titles.



**Plate 1 A Section View of Annarpurma Salt Package.**



**Plate 2: A Visual of Golden Penny Spaghetti**

Brackets (normal or square) relatively have a similar visual impact as they visually regroup particular sections of the message. The brackets equally “demarcate” portion of the text that could be translated versions of the overall marketing message (see plate 3). One problem with using punctuation marks is the potentials (of this text splitting tool) to create semantic noise. As will later be demonstrated, some readers may aberrantly interpret the bracket used in a package design, not as a linguistic

differentiation tool but as a normal parenthesis to further explain an idea which was earlier enunciated.



**Plate. 1 A Section View of Homa Party Chips Package**

Viewing such potentials for semantic noise in the use of punctuation, Strizver contends that although punctuation marks are used for generally similar purposes in other languages, differences in grammar and sentence structure can affect the way punctuation is applied by encoders or interpreted by readers [16-18]. “Style conventions for punctuation usage can vary even between countries where the same language is spoken, such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom”[16]. In line with this, whenever typesetting for other languages or countries, the designer is compelled to make sure he or she has familiarized himself with their individual requirements.

**B. Results of the Focus Group Discussion**

Based on their reading of the various packages and their assessment of the designers’ use of punctuation, the discussants commented on the readability of information presented at specific sections of the packages as well as on the influence the package design had on their perception of the various products (on promotion) or brands. Their evaluation of the packages gives a number of facts pointing to the (in)effectiveness of punctuation marks in the designing of multilingual packages. A summary of comments gathered from the two focus group discussions is presented below:

- a) Punctuation marks considerably reduce the readability of multilingual text. Such reduced readability is particularly observed or accentuated in sections of the text that are too compact or clustered. A good number of discussants in both focus group discussions found it difficult to spot information presented in their languages (the language they understand) at a simple glance. While some expatriates (French speaking discussants) could not at all spot versions of the marketing messages (featuring on the packages), a number of English speaking discussants succeeded to find the English version of the messages, only

after reading in between the lines thoroughly. Most of the English-speaking discussants could detect the English versions of the marketing messages because the various units of information were basically presented in English with successive and selective French, Spanish and/or Portuguese translations.

- b) It was equally more difficult for French speaking discussants to spot information translated into the French language in situation of use of periods for visual punctuation. Only few (about 5 out of 14) managed to locate information in French differentiated from English version with periods.
- c) The reduced readability of the units of information did not however negatively affect the discussants' perception of the product on promotion. Most discussants (especially the expatriates) based their "judgment" of the products more on the visual placed on the packages and the catchy slogans and titles that accompanied some of these visuals. This seems to confirm the theory that visuals have greater potentials than text to influence a consumer's choice for a product.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This paper sought to explore some of the challenges faced by the designer in laying out multilingual packages. It identified a number of typographical and design approaches often adopted by designers to surmount these challenges. The approaches include (i) partial translation, translation by simplification (of information on package) and (ii) typographical solutions including typeface, point size, spacing, coloring, framing/box drawing and punctuation marks. The paper particularly focused on punctuation as a reader device, arguing that the use of punctuation marks permits the designers to maximize space in setting much text. However, despite their relevance in such a difficult and unique situation, punctuation marks have the disadvantage of rendering the multilingual text relatively compact and often less readable as the different versions of the advertising/marketing message often appear somewhat merged, with text clustered in blocs. With such an approach to designing multilingual text, it is often difficult for the user (of the product) to easily spot the version destined to him/her and practically gather the message provided.

This paper evaluated the effectiveness of the use of punctuation in the designing of multilingual packages by Nigerian manufacturers, based on two methods including a content analysis of a dozen packages made in Nigeria and a series of focus group discussions with both bilingual and unilingual (expatriate) users of these packages. It demonstrated

the reduced effectiveness of punctuation, in making information readable and understandable to target readers.

Based on the findings of the study we here recommend that designers use more practical visual punctuation marks such as color or font differentiation to distinguish a version of the marketing message from another. Given the context of reduced space, such an approach may enable designers to still maximize space while creating visual contrast (through color or type face – say italic) between the various languages of the message. We equally recommend that where financial means permits, manufacturers should envisage producing unilingual package in which there will be ample space to communicate product information, instead of conceiving multilingual packages that will be reduced in space and be less effective as a brand communication vehicle. Such a policy may be more beneficial as there is theoretically no gain in producing a multilingual package with information that will not be perfectly readable by both Nigerians and consumers from international markets.

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