

## Retail store signage: English or local language?

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**This article presents a brief empirical study of the use of retail signage in both English and local languages in India. The fieldwork undertaken attempted to understand the impact of English language versus local language in relation to consumer attitudes. The hypothesis that status-seeking attitudes lead to English as a preferred language for signage in stores is clearly shown to be falsified, indicating that consumer choices seem to depend largely on other factors than the language chosen for store signs.**

*Keywords: business culture, English, globalization, India, language, marketing, retail, shop signage, signboards*

### INTRODUCTION

The Indian landscape is, now more than ever, covered with a plethora of signage. Such signage plays both directional as well as marketing roles in retail environments. Shopping in India is experiencing a noticeable change with the remarkable rise and growth of the retail industry, with globalising trends (Matusitz and Reyers 2010), but also notable attempts to recapture ground for regional Indian languages when it comes to shop signs (Taguchi 2012).

The retail sector in India can be segregated into unorganised and organised sectors. While the mom-and-pop *kirana* stores continue to thrive, Indian retailing has been undergoing a structural shift and it is widely presumed that there is a movement away from small family-run shops to larger organised retail outlets, which then maybe also rely on different forms of advertisement of their presence and thus use specific signage as well. Certainly, these organised formats in retail have brought home the effects of globalisation like never before. It has also brought in extensive competition, the outcome of which has been creation of new markets in the retail arenas, such as India and China replacing the saturated western markets (Mishra 2008) so that, noticeably the Indian retail market is attracting a large number of international players anticipating explosive growth. According to a study by an economics research arm of McKinsey, the McKinsey Global Institute (Beinhocker et al. 2007), India has become a trillion dollar economy. Retail sales volume is forecast to grow by less than 2% in 2010, but should then accelerate to an annual average of 5.5% in 2011-15 (pwc 2012) In this competitive scenario all the players are increasingly focused on how to stay relevant to their customers.

Store marketing is an essential component of an overall marketing strategy. It supports the use of external marketing campaign efforts including advertising, events and promotions. Retail marketing tactics include in-store signage, sales circulars, coupons, product demonstra-

tions, aisle promotions and displays. A very important role is played by the humble store signage, which plays at least these three functions. It attracts customers, brands the store in the minds of the consumers and creates impulse sales. Signs meet these demands most effectively when they possess optimum visibility, readability and are conspicuous (Munson 2010).

## **ROLE OF STORE ENVIRONMENT**

Today much importance is given to store environments in the larger stores, while the traditional *kiranas* may be anything from a highly organised and neat outfit to a messy and even dirty and unappealing space, from which one purchases necessary items. Retailers at the higher level of organization have always innately understood the importance of the store environment. In both the provision of services and the retailing of products, expenditure on creating the most effective and user friendly environment has been enormous (Greenland and McGoldrick 1994). Retailers seem to recognise the importance of their store's environments by spending significant amounts of their budgets on exterior and interior remodeling of stores (Skenazy 1987). Therefore, the designed environment has become the focus of considerable attention within the marketing strategies of shopping centres, retailers and other service providers (McGoldrick and Pieros 1998). During the last few decades, as the importance of the environment has also become increasingly prominent in the study of the retail environment, researchers have begun to study the influence of the store environment on consumer behaviour (Shahed Gilboa and Rafaeli 2003).

The emotional nature of shopping has also been the focus of many researchers (Sherman et al. 1997). The idea that it is not only products and services that are consumed, but different stores, shops, retail outlets and malls attract customers through branding and attractive signage has also gained more momentum (Maclaran

et al. 1999, Penaloza 1998, Uzzell, 1995). To understand the relationship between consumers and retail environment is one of the most fundamental tasks and challenges of marketing (Luomala 2003). These studies indicate that environmental cues may be especially important in categorising retail services (Ward et al, 1992).

Research has also been able to establish that retail environments embody meanings. Such meanings vary according to the type of retail environment and according to the individual (Fishwick and Vineng 1992). The results of a study by Kerr and Tacon (1999) suggest that individuals are sensitive to the psychological states required in particular settings. Korpela and Hartig (1996) have shown that differences were forced in emotional states associated with different places. One of the factors in the environment which has been shown to affect consumer buying patterns is certainly the signage used in the store (Fishwick and Vineng 1992).

## **ROLE OF SIGNAGE**

Signage is a general term for any sort of graphic display intended to convey information to an audience. Signs play a crucial role in store communication and are similar to sign language which bridges the communication gap between people when voices cannot reach them (Al-Jarrah and Al-Omari 2007). There are many different types of signage which have existed for years. Modern signage relies on words, often accompanied by images. When you use signage, you employ one of the best workers you will ever hire. Signage is also one of many elements that contributes to a sense of place (Signage for Main Streets 2009). In effect signs reflect the character of the businesses they represent. A signage is basically an identity that represents an organisation, a person, or an idea. Thus the signage is created deliberately with intentions of shaping the image of the entity (Harrison 1999). A number of physical and psychological factors may influence the effectiveness of signage systems. These include the vis-

ibility of the sign and the likelihood that the observer will correctly comprehend the message being conveyed by the sign. In India most of the organised retail formats seem to prefer English language signage, while the *kiranas* have mostly stuck to local languages, though there is an increasing influence of English here, too.

### **MISGUIDED PRESUMPTIONS? ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN INDIA**

India is clearly a land of many cultures and languages. Into this land English made its advent with the British rule. The British were given a lot of political stature due to their political power, and were required to adopt a pose that would fit their status. Thus English became a marker of the white man's power (Hohenthal 2003). There have been numerous claims about English evoking associations of globalism, modernity and prestige (see e.g. Alm 2003, Bhatia 1992 and 2001, Kelly-Holms 2005, Piller 2001). The English language was part of prestige and power, so that in India, English gradually acquired socially and administratively dominant roles; the power and prestige of language was defined by the domains of language used (Jose 2009). Within 200 years of bondage, a good majority of the Indian population learnt the language of the invaders.

Acquaintance with English was and is probably still assumed to be a hallmark of affluence. English is used in India as a tool of power to cultivate a group of people who identify with the cultural and other norms of the elite (Hohenthal 2003), so that use of English is also a social status symbol and opens doors to opportunities. Parents see English medium schools as a way of pushing their children up the social scale. Scholars like Mohan (2010) believe that if India is to utilise opportunities and expand its universal viewpoint, then English is the only language which should be learnt by all. English language, as Kachru (1983) has shown is not only used for the utilitarian function of communication and self-expression but also to differentiate and

define one's self-image, to locate the self in society and to judge others.

In the marketing arena too, English language is finding increasing popularity. Most of the advertisements in the national media is in English, with both practical and image considerations. English rather than the national language Hindi is widely seen as the unifying language of the county. Moreover, it is assumed that buyers of advertised products not only prefer the use of English for communication, but also perceive it as a mark of prestige. According to researchers such as Takahashi (1990), Martin (2002), Alm (2003), Ustinova and Bhatia (2005), and Lee (2006), English is used because it enhances the image of a product. There have been only a few empirical studies that compare English with local languages in advertising. Shoham (1996) compared an English commercial with an Israeli commercial, but these commercials differed in many ways like brand, actors and background of the commercials. These differences hamper any comparison between the language strategies. Therefore the preference for the local language advertisement that was found cannot be clearly attributed to a language effect (Krishna and Ahluwalia 2008, Gerritsen et al. 2007).

Most of the major retail chains in India have used English language for promotion and signage. According to Hornikx et al (2010), regardless of whether English is understood, English would be well appreciated by consumers because of the positive associations it has been claimed to evoke (Sherry et al, 1987). Since English symbolises modernisation, the potential for expanded functional roles and ultimately social mobility and internationalised outlook, while also acknowledging that English signage has the utilitarian purpose of being understood cross-culturally, the use of English in promotion and signage can also be interpreted as a linguistic strategy used by marketers to involve consumers with a product with connotations less elegantly achieved through the local language.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study attempts to understand the impact of English language versus local language in consumers' attitude to retail environments. An attempt has also been made to understand whether status-seeking attitude leads to English as a preferred language for signage in stores. In order to test the hypothesis, different statistical techniques have been employed with the help of SPSS 16.

In terms of measurement, in order to study the factors influencing choice of language in signage a questionnaire was framed. This questionnaire had items for demographics, status-seeking behaviour and items relevant to the measurement of acceptance of English and local language signage among consumers. The demographics and signage language acceptance was measured using category scales, while the status items were measured using a five point Likert scale, wherein the respondents indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement (strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree).

For sampling and pilot testing, a convenience sampling technique was applied. A pilot study was conducted to calculate the required sample size and ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. Content validity was ensured by putting the instrument through a panel of judges who included marketing and research methodology professors. The pilot sample was also used to calculate the sample size based on the formula for means. The formula used for calculation of sample size was  $N = ((z \cdot s)/e)^2$  where  $z$  is the value that indicates the confidence level on the data,  $s$  is the standard deviation and  $e$  is error. Since the group that was studied was homogeneous, the confidence level was taken at 95%. Hence the  $z$  value from the  $z$  table turned out to be 1.96. The standard deviation( $s$ ) for the pilot group of 25 came out to be 1.15.

The error value was acceptable and was set at ( $e$ ) = 0.25. Substituting all these values in the above given formula, the required sample size was calculated as 81.68 and rounded up to 82. The final sample collected was considerably higher at 182. This was done to minimise error at the time of analysis.

Table 1: Sample Profile

Variable	Item	Frequency	Percentage
Age	less than 21yrs	53	29.1
	21yrs to 40yrs	100	54.9
	More than 40yrs	12	6.6
Gender	Male	76	45
	Female	93	55
Educational qualification	Up to 12	27	15.4
	Graduation	80	45.7
	Post Graduation	61	34.9
	Professionals	7	4
Household income	Less than 30,000/month	32	18.9
	30,000- 60,000	36	21.3
	60,000-1 lakh	50	29.6
	Above 1 lakh	51	30.2
Occupation	Student	13	7.52
	Salaried(clerical or less)	17	9.8
	Salaried (Mgr/prof)	96	55.2
	Own Business	48	27.6

To carry out the analysis of the data collected, various statistical techniques were used. The entire analysis of the data was done with the help of SPSS 16 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Descriptive Statistics have been used to summarise and describe the data. Cronbach Alpha was used to ensure the reliability of the status scale which indicated robustness at  $\alpha = 0.866$ . In order to test the hypothesis, chi-square analysis and ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) have been used as well.

### FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Regarding the sample profile, the various demographics items have been represented in tabular form, illustrating relative magnitudes or frequencies. Table 1 indicates the number and the percentage of each individual demographic variable. The majority of the sample was in the age group of 21 to 40 yrs (54.9%), with almost equal representation from men and women. The income groups are more or less evenly distributed, increasing the representativeness of the sample and the majority of the respondents are salaried managers or professionals.

#### Hypothesis Testing

We sought to test this by reference in language of signage and store visit frequency.

*H1: There is significant influence of preference for signage language and the stores patronized by customers.*

This indicates that only the name of the store and the language of the product labeling have an influence on store choice. The analysis indicates the 33% of those who would like to see the store name in local language visit Big Bazaar and 33% a local *kirana* store. 66.7% of those who like to see the product labelling in the local languages tend to visit Big Bazaar while 33% visit the *kirana*. Therefore, the null hypothesis is not accepted with reference to store name and product labelling.

#### Preference in language of signage and use of signage language in the stores patronised

*H2: There is significant difference in preference for signage language and use of language in the stores patronised by customers.*

The hypothesis is supported as indicated in Table 3. But unexpectedly consumers seem to look for an increased use of local language in the store signage. It can be seen from Table 4 below that most of the customers prefer English as a language for the various kinds of signage, but many also want the local language in addition to the signage in English.

#### Demographics and Preference for Signage language

*H3: There is significant difference in preference for signage language among the different age groups.*

Table 2: Preference in language of signage and store visit frequency

Type of Signage	Pearsons ch-square	Degrees of freedom	Sig.
Direction to Amenities	16.590	16	.413
Price Information	17.701	16	.342
Name of store	36.956	16	.002
Section Marker	21.442	16	.162
Product Information	19.292	16	.254
Offers and discounts	19.914	16	.224
Adverts and Promos	18.011	16	.323
Store warning and safety information	21.468	16	.161
Product labelling	33.938	16	.006

Table 3: Preference in language of signage and use of signage language in the stores patronised

Type of Signage	Pearson's chi-square	Degrees of freedom	Sig.
Direction to Amenities	49.484	4	.000
Price Information	50.626	4	.000
Name of store	59.837	4	.000
Section Marker	43.617	4	.000
Product Information	38.544	4	.000
Offers and discounts	47.353	4	.000
Adverts and Promos	41.156	4	.000
Store warning and safety information	27.538	4	.000
Product labelling	28.181	4	.000

Table 4: Preference in language of signage and use of signage language in the stores patronised (2)

Type of Signage	Language	Use (%)	Preference (%)
Direction to Amenities	English	47.3	48.3
	Local Language	10.4	3.9
	Both	40.1	47.8
Price Information	English	60.4	59.8
	Local Language	6	1.1
	Both	30.8	39.1
Name of store	English	54.9	52
	Local Language	6	2.2
	Both	35.2	45.8
Section Marker	English	64.8	57.2
	Local Language	5.5	2.8
	Both	27.5	40
Product Information	English	60.3	54.4
	Local Language	10.1	3.3
	Both	29.6	42.2
Offers and discounts	English	59.7	49.4
	Local Language	7.4	1.7
	Both	33	48.9
Adverts and Promos	English	53.4	43.9
	Local Language	6.2	3.3
	Both	40.4	52.8
Store warning and safety information	English	45.2	37.8
	Local Language	5.6	1.1
	Both	49.2	61.1
Product labelling	English	65.4	56.4
	Local Language	3.3	1.7
	Both	29.1	41.9

While it may be suspected that the younger generation which is more exposed to western media and English-based education will have an increased preference for English signage, the chi-square analysis (Table 5) indicates that age has no reference to preference in the language of signage. Gender (Table 6) also has not been seen to constitute a significant variable in choice of language of signage. Neither qualification

(Table 7) nor occupation (Table 9) seems to have an influence either. Again surprisingly, higher income groups do not show any extra affinity for English (Table 8). Therefore the null hypothesis is accepted in all these cases.

*H4: There is significant difference in preference for signage language among the different genders.*

*Table 5: Age and Preference for Signage Language*

Type of Signage	Pearson's chi-square	Degrees of freedom	Sig.
Direction to Amenities	2.099	4	.717
Price Information	3.275	4	.513
Name of store	3.589	4	.464
Section Marker	4.130	4	.389
Product Information	4.064	4	.397
Offers and discounts	2.229	4	.694
Adverts and Promos	4.444	4	.349
Store warning and safety information	7.630	4	.106
Product labelling	4.930	4	.295

*Table 6: Gender and Preference for Signage Language*

Type of Signage	Pearson's chi-square	Degrees of freedom	Sig.
Direction to Amenities	2.586	2	.274
Price Information	2.772	2	.250
Name of store	4.311	2	.116
Section Marker	3.050	2	.218
Product Information	1.228	2	.541
Offers and discounts	5.199	2	.074
Adverts and Promos	4.705	2	.095
Store warning and safety information	4.577	2	.101
Product labelling	3.048	2	.218

*Table 7: Qualification and Preference for Signage language*

Type of Signage	Pearson's chi-square	Degrees of freedom	Sig.
Direction to Amenities	5.575	6	.472
Price Information	4.843	6	.564
Name of store	7.315	6	.293
Section Marker	7.233	6	.300
Product Information	8.072	6	.233
Offers and discounts	9.843	6	.131
Adverts and Promos	4.931	6	.553
Store warning and safety information	5.820	6	.444
Product labelling	6.857	6	.334

*H0: There is no significant difference in preference for signage language among the groups with different qualification*

*H5: There is significant difference in preference for signage language among the groups with different qualification*

*H0: There is no significant difference in preference for signage language among the different Income groups.*

*H6: There is significant difference in preference for signage language among the different Income groups.*

*H0: There is no significant difference in preference for signage language among the different occupation groups.*

*H7: There is significant difference in preference for signage language among the different occupation groups.*

### **Status seeking behaviour and preference of Signage Language**

*H0: There is no significant impact of Status seeking behaviour on preference for signage language.*

*H8: There is significant impact of Status seeking behaviour on preference for signage language.*

The impact of status-seeking behaviour and its impact on preference for signage language were explored by using ANOVA (Analysis of Variance). Based on literature it could be presumed that respondents with status-seeking tendencies will prefer English, but significant impact of status-seeking behaviour on preference for signage language has been seen in the analysis (Table 10).

### **CONCLUDING DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

While 37.8% to 59.8% of the respondents would like to see their signage in Eng-

*Table 8: Income and Preference for Signage Language*

<b>Type of Signage</b>	<b>Pearson's chi-square</b>	<b>Degrees of freedom</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Direction to Amenities	5.675	6	.461
Price Information	5.664	6	.462
Name of store	3.930	6	.686
Section Marker	5.505	6	.481
Product Information	5.827	6	.443
Offers and discounts	11.183	6	.083
Adverts and Promos	5.583	6	.471
Store warning and safety information	4.061	6	.668
Product labelling	5.584	6	.471

*Table 9: Occupation and Preference for Signage Language*

<b>Type of Signage</b>	<b>Pearson's chi-square</b>	<b>Degrees of freedom</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Direction to Amenities	14.680	6	.023
Price Information	5.176	6	.521
Name of store	4.851	6	.563
Section Marker	8.786	6	.186
Product Information	5.626	6	.466
Offers and discounts	11.123	6	.085
Adverts and Promos	5.494	6	.482
Store warning and safety information	8.417	6	.209
Product labelling	5.379	6	.496



Table 10: Status seeking behaviour and preference of Signage Language

Type of Signage	Language	N	Mean	F	df	Sig
Direction to Amenities	English	85	2.182	1.738	2	.179
	Local Language	7	2.738			
	Both	85	2.160			
Price Information	English	106	2.244	.846	2	.431
	Local Language	2	1.667			
	Both	68	2.132			
Name of store	English	91	2.209	.093	2	.912
	Local Language	4	2.042			
	Both	81	2.185			
Section Marker	English	102	2.216	1.080	2	.342
	Local Language	4	2.708			
	Both	71	2.134			
Product Information	English	97	2.186	.082	2	.922
	Local Language	5	2.333			
	Both	75	2.196			
Offers and discounts	English	88	2.163	.400	2	.671
	Local Language	3	2.556			
	Both	86	2.213			
Adverts and Promos	English	78	2.147	.771	2	.464
	Local Language	6	2.556			
	Both	93	2.209			
Store warning and safety information	English	67	2.132	2.989	2	.053
	Local Language	2	3.5			
	Both	108	2.2			
Product labeling	English	100		1.356	2	.261
	Local Language	3				
	Both	73				

lish, an almost equal number if not more respondents (39.1%- 61.1%) would like to see their signage in both English and the local languages. It can also be seen that signage plays a role in store choice only to the extent of the respondents' preference in

store name and product labeling, which they probably see as an important input into their shopping decision making. The analysis has also indicated that demographics like age, gender, highest qualification, occupation and income have no influence on choice

of language of signage. Neither has status-seeking behaviour any impact on which language they would like their signage in.

But it can also be seen that the respondents feel that their choice in signage is not being adhered to in the stores of their choice. There is favour found for using both the local and the English language in signage irrespective of their demographics or social aspirations. This would indicate, then, that stores that use only English or the local language as the signage option may be missing out on communicating fully to their customers.

In conclusion, we can confirm that signs are an important part of the store environment and play a crucial role in store communication. This study attempted to study the impact of English language versus local language in consumer choice of stores. An attempt was also made to understand whether status-seeking attitudes lead to English as a preferred language for signage in stores. While language is seen to have a marginal impact overall, status-seeking behaviour has actually, according to our results, no influence on choice of language. *This means that consumer choices are not mainly influenced by language issues, but by other considerations, with which this particular research was not concerned.*

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