

# Multilingualism in labelling

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## Comparison of the situation and the linguistic policies regarding the labelling of products in linguistic communities with similar characteristics to Catalonia

### Abstract

The situation of Catalan in labelling constitutes an atypical case when considering the treatment that companies and the respective legislations apply to different comparable cases. The analysis of various models of countries with linguistic communities similar to or even sensibly inferior in number of speakers than Catalan, and in situations of plurilingualism similar to that of Spain, confirms the exceptional treatment given to this question in our country.

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### 1. Introduction

Plurilingualism on product labels is a widely extended practice. Distribution logistics mean that it is not exclusively limited to one linguistic community or particular country or state, but that multilingual labelling enables no differentiation to be made in stock in accordance with the functional dynamics of distributors and the market. This means that the languages present on the label of a product are often not only those present or official or widely used at the place of purchase, or even those used by potential purchasers from other linguistic communities that travel or move to that area, but the languages are often without any or almost any representation in the place where the purchase is made. A product purchased in Lisbon could, for example, be labelled in Spanish, Portuguese, Greek and English all at the same time. Sometimes the basic or obligatory information about the product may be displayed in more than twenty different languages on the same label or package. Governed by the commercial interest of this distribution, manufacturers have found practical solutions to fit a whole series of languages on the label, and therefore, for the time being, this does not imply any impediment to the sale of the product, in any case an advantage that enables reducing control over the distribution of stock.

### 2. Criteria used by companies for selecting the languages present on labels

The criteria for the selection of the languages on the label is obviously not based on reasons of pure communication. It must be considered that a large number of consumers do not read the label, or it is assumed that it is not necessary to read it to understand the type of product they buy, or that the reading is limited to mere identification of the type of product. This confirmation is highly present in various studies. In the study *Attitudes of Catalans to the Commercial use of Catalan* (Aguilera M. 1994)<sup>1</sup> showed the poor recall of languages on the labels of sample products even when they were only labelled in one language. The criteria used by the company for the selection are based, evidently apart from reasons of communication, on commercial questions, image of the product and the company before the customer, and the obligations to which the

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<sup>1</sup> AGUILERA, M.M. *Actituds dels consumidors catalans davant de l'ús comercial del català*. Elaborated from a survey made by Line Staff Consulting (1994). Catalan Sociolinguistic Institute of the Directorate General of Linguistic Policy of the Generalitat of Catalonia. 1995.

product information is subject to under applicable legislation. This was made quite clear in the conclusions of the texts of the exhibition Language in the labelling of large brands. 2004<sup>2</sup> made by the Platform for Language, which made a collection of labels from different countries whose characteristic linguistic communities were comparable to Catalonia "For companies, the language on labels is much more than a mere means of providing information about the product. It is important to stress a conclusion that may seem evident, but which implies a very important question, and this is that the labelling of products is different in each country, and that they seek to adapt as best they can to the specific characteristics of the society where the product is to be consumed. The labelling of products, more than a desire to transmit information that is understood by the consumer, constitutes a way of guaranteeing respect and bringing the product closer to the customer"

The languages selected for the label can then be differentiated in two obvious aspects: The free choice of the company according to its own commercial and customer service criteria, and the legal obligations the company must comply with.

### *2.1. Criteria for the selection according to the internal considerations of the company*

Companies, apart from a will to communicate, have commitments regarding their ethical and commercial strategy when dealing with customers. This, even though the potential consumers of a certain linguistic community could have a complete knowledge of another, more widely used language already used by the company in other places, the fact that the language of these consumers appears on the label, and more so considering that these consumers have an important commercial weight, could undoubtedly favour bringing the product closer to the customer and therefore consolidate the benefits obtained by the manufacturer. In economic terms this action is practically "obligatory" when the commercial environment, and perhaps even the competition, is already present in this territory respecting the language. It is well known that as a basic criterion a company will never assume policies of poor quality customer service when they are widely or totally assumed by the rest of the market. No company wants to be the negative exception. As for ethical commitments, which without doubt are also very often the result of the commercial strategy itself, large companies usually have codes of conduct that they make public as a guarantee of action before the customer. These codes of conduct often contain references to respect the cultural environment of the consumer. As an example, take three samples of large companies where these commitments are evident, even though this practice could be generalised to all companies of a certain size with more or less similar codes:

Extract from the Corporate Social Responsibility of Heineken, a Dutch multinational company specially known for beer<sup>3</sup>:

"Society expects quality companies to not only provide good products and obtain positive financial results; it expects them to conduct their business within socially acceptable standards (...). Based on this idea, our actions are based on the principle of respect for different cultures."

Extract from the code of conduct of PepsiCo, a multinational company of American origin in the food sector<sup>4</sup>:

"We are committed to commercialising our products to all groups, treating consumers with respect, sensitivity and integrity." "We collaborate with many groups to create programs that favour minority communities."

Extract from the commitments of the Corporate Business Principles of the Swiss multinational Nestlé<sup>5</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> Exposició *La llengua en l'etiquetatge de les grans marques*, developed by the Platform for Language (2004), available on the web page: <http://www.plataforma-llengua.cat/exposicio> (last access April 2006)

<sup>3</sup> available from [www.heinekeninternational.com](http://www.heinekeninternational.com) (last access April 2006)

<sup>4</sup> available from [www.pepsico.com](http://www.pepsico.com) (last access April 2006)

<sup>5</sup> Available from [www.nestle.com](http://www.nestle.com) (last access April 2006)

“We are committed to commercialising our products to all groups, treating consumers with respect, sensitivity and integrity.” “We collaborate with many groups to create programs that favour minority communities.”

## 2.2. Criteria for selection based on the legal situation in the place of distribution

These commitments, whatever social responsibilities are behind them, are not always fulfilled in the practice of labelling. Neither is there always a consolidated environment of normality, whether on a social or commercial level, that “obliges” the companies to use the languages of linguistic communities with enough economic potential. Even in the event that this environment exists, the public powers often feel obliged to guarantee this right, or to establish regulations for the understandability of the product information to ensure correct distribution and use of the product by citizens, and protect their health. It is therefore evidently necessary to clarify the role of the language on the label. At this stage the legislation of the respective authorities of each country comes into play with the purpose of guaranteeing citizen rights. Within the context of democratic countries, respect for the language of the consumer of linguistic communities is respected, always provided, obviously, that the community has sufficient commercial weight. The presence of these languages is normally guaranteed by linguistic legislation or by specific legislation that refer to each type of label or consumer rights.

Finland, would be a good example of this second case, and a sample of a plurilingual state with languages considerably less spoken than Catalan. The treatment of labels is regulated by law, so that depending on where the product is distributed, the label must be in Finnish, Swedish or both languages. In this country two national languages are recognised, Finnish and Swedish, both with far fewer speakers than Catalan (this recognition is guaranteed by the Constitution of 2000, as well as the *Language Law* of 2004). The total population of the country is about 5.2 million, with approximately 94% having Finnish as their mother tongue, and 6% Swedish<sup>6</sup>. The latest *Language Law 423/2003*<sup>7</sup>, which will come into force in January 2004, defining the country according to linguistic areas based on municipalities (Article 5 of the Law). In general, a region or municipality is considered bilingual if the minority language constitutes more than 8% of the population, otherwise it is monolingual. According to the decree of the Council of State, the 452 municipalities of Finland are considered monolingual in Finnish (389, 86%), monolingual in Swedish (21, 5%), bilingual with Swedish majority (22, 5%) or bilingual with Finnish majority (20, 4%) (Wikberg, K. 1999<sup>8</sup>). The 16 municipalities of the Åland Islands are also monolingual in Swedish with a special regime as a state associated to Finland and with a completely independent linguistic policy. The labelling policy strictly follows these criteria; in the bilingual areas the labelling is at least in both languages and in monolingual areas it is in each language depending on the language of the region. It is important to note that the recognition of Swedish is not only a result of the populational weight of this linguistic community in some regions, but is justified by the fact that it has been used as a language since the XII century. The linguistic policy in labelling follows the parameters combining both individual and collective rights (Wikberg, K 1999). As an example of the legislation resulting from the *Language Law*, the *Decree for labelling packaged food products (1991/794)*<sup>9</sup> clearly specifies in Article 21 that all products distributed in Finland must be labelled in Swedish and Finnish, and in the event that they are manufactured in the country, they may be labelled in a single language for the territories that have been considered as monolingual.

In extreme cases, when other important linguistic communities are beside a linguistic community with its own language, and the citizens with their own language have a wide knowledge of one or more of the languages of the other communities, then the measures may be even stricter to guarantee protection of the minority language. This is the case of Latvia. According to the classifications of Fishman (1968) and Lijphart (1984) Latvia is a state with a clearly heterogeneous

<sup>6</sup> According to data from the web site of the University of Laval, Quebec  
<http://www.tlfq.ulaval.ca/axl/europe/finlande.htm>, (last access April 2006)

<sup>7</sup> Available from <http://www.finlex.fi/pdf/saadkaan/E0030423.PDF> (last access April 2006)

<sup>8</sup> Kristina Wikberg was director of Swedish Language Services of the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities.

<sup>9</sup> Available from <http://www.elintarvikevirasto.fi/english/p3563.pdf> (last access April 2006)

linguistic composition<sup>10</sup>, in this regard it is a case similar to Catalonia and Spain. In 1991 Latvians represented 52% of the population of the country (Leprêtre, M. 2002<sup>11</sup>), just like a very similar 54% feel Catalan is their own language in Catalonia (*Statistics on linguistic uses in Catalonia 2003*<sup>12</sup>). Obviously the situation of Latvia regarding Latvian was not as favourable as Catalonia, at least in 1989, just before the first law of Latvian languages of 1992. During the 1989 census, only between 18% and 20% of citizens belonging to ethnic minorities other than Latvian stated that they had a knowledge of Latvian (Druviete, I, 2001<sup>13</sup>). That is to say about 80% had no knowledge of the language, many of them did not even understand it (this is mainly the Slavic population which, because of the notable differences between languages, the lack of knowledge also corresponds to understanding). We must recall that close to half the population are not considered to be of Latvian origin, in fact even today (2000 census) only 57.6% are considered Latvian, in spite of other groups having adopted Latvian as their mother tongue, reaching 62% in 2000. Russian was, especially before independence, the most widely understood language, with a continuing considerable bilingualism (Druviete, I. 2001). In Catalonia, according to the 2001 census<sup>14</sup>, understanding reaches 94%, probably even higher than Latvian in Latvia. On the other hand the total population of Latvia is close to 2.5 million, considerably below that of Catalonia.

In view of this situation the government introduced the *Republic of Latvia Languages Law (1992)*, which established positive discrimination in favour of Latvian. In fact the model of this law came from the linguistic policies of Quebec (see below) based on the collective rights according to the territory (Druviete, I. 2001). Article 20 carefully set out the language for use in economic activity. And so Latvian became the only obligatory language. All labelling and instructions for products produced in Latvia, must be only written in Latvian, and it cannot appear beside other languages. In the case of the labelling and instructions for products not produced in Latvia, the presence of other languages on the label is permitted, always provided Latvian is included, and that it occupy the prime place, the typeface not be smaller and that it contain at least the same information as the other languages. This of course affected the labelling for other countries that shared product distribution; so that for example Lithuanian or Estonian do not occupy the prime position on the labels of many products also distributed in Latvia. Later, specially as a result of Latvia's entry into the European Union (Druviete, I. 2001) the legislation changed even though it continues to be very protectionist in regard to Latvian. The current Article 21 of the *State Language Law* of 1999<sup>15</sup> clearly specifies in Point 2 that the labels, packaging and instructions for products produced and distributed in Latvia must be in Latvian. In the event that there is another language, Latvian must always occupy a preferential position and under no circumstances can the typeface be smaller or the message contain less information. In the case of products manufactured outside Latvia but distributed in the Republic, all the information must also be in Latvian. This is specified in point 3 of Article 21.

The case of Quebec in Canada is well known. In Quebec there are about 6 million inhabitants who have French as their mother tongue, 20% of the population has other mother tongues, especially English. The latest 2003 update of the *Charter of the French Language*, in chapter VII, Article 51, clearly specifies that all instructions, inscriptions on the packaging and label of a product must be at least in French and if there is another language it must not be longer than the French text<sup>16</sup>. This affects almost all products, the few exceptions, understood to be for example products that are manufactured but not distributed in Quebec, are considered in the Regulation on the trade and business language<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> See the article by Albert Branchadell in Noves SL spring-summer 2004 *New Member States of the European Union: demography and linguistic policy* [http://www6.gencat.net/llengcat/noves/hm04primavera-estiu/branchadell1\\_3.htm](http://www6.gencat.net/llengcat/noves/hm04primavera-estiu/branchadell1_3.htm) (last access April 2006)

<sup>11</sup> See the article by Marc Leprêtre in Noves SL spring 2002 *Linguistic policy of the Russian Federation: linguistic diversity and national identity*. [http://www6.gencat.net/llengcat/noves/hm02primavera/internacional/marc1\\_8.htm](http://www6.gencat.net/llengcat/noves/hm02primavera/internacional/marc1_8.htm) (last access April 2006)

<sup>12</sup> data from Statistics Institute of Catalonia Available from <http://www.idescat.net/cat/idescat/publicacions/cataleg/pdfdocs/EULC2003.pdf> (last access April 2006)

<sup>13</sup> See the article by Noves SL, winter 2001 *Language Policy and Protection of the State Language in Latvia*, by Ina Druviete [http://www6.gencat.net/llengcat/noves/hm01hivern/internacional/a\\_druviete1\\_4.htm](http://www6.gencat.net/llengcat/noves/hm01hivern/internacional/a_druviete1_4.htm) (last access April 2006)

<sup>14</sup> Data from the 2001 population census according to data from the Statistics Institute of Catalonia <http://www.idescat.net/dequavi/Dequavi?TC=444&VO=15&V1=1> (last access April 2006)

<sup>15</sup> Available from [http://www.minelres.lv/NationalLegislation/Latvia/Latvia\\_Language\\_English.htm](http://www.minelres.lv/NationalLegislation/Latvia/Latvia_Language_English.htm) (last access April 2006)

<sup>16</sup> Available from <http://www.oqlf.gouv.qc.ca/charte/charte/index.html> (last access April 2006)

<sup>17</sup> Available from <http://www.oqlf.gouv.qc.ca/charte/reglements/regcommaffaires1.html> (last access April 2006)

The policies of recognition of plurilingualism in Belgium and Switzerland are also well known. In both countries, the strict recognition of the different official languages by territorial areas guarantees the labelling in each language depending on the place of distribution. Belgium has a firm policy for recognition of languages. French, Dutch and German are official languages to all effects. Since the Constitution of 1993 there are three regions (Walloon, Flanders and Brussels) and 3 linguistic communities (French, Dutch and German). Each of these communities has far fewer speakers than the Catalan linguistic community in Spain. In the case of the German community it hardly reaches 80,000 speakers. Each community has all the rights to legislate and create independent policies that reign to all effects in every aspect that affects language.

As for labelling, the *Law of Commercial Practices and Information and Consumer Protection*<sup>18</sup> dated July 14, 1991, establishes in Article 13 that products must at least be labelled the language or languages of the linguistic region where they are distributed; so that the presence of Dutch, French and German is guaranteed in the corresponding linguistic regions.

Switzerland, with more than 6 million inhabitants, has a clear majority of German speakers (or speakers of Swiss dialects) with more than 73% of the population (4.5 million). There are about 1.3 million French speakers, 300,000 speak Italian and 50,000 Romansch<sup>19</sup>. Obviously the constitution (of 1848 but revised more than 140 times) recognises the four languages as national languages. Italian, German and French are official to all effects, and Romansh is official in relations with speakers of this language, although it is gaining more and more recognition. Switzerland is organised in monolingual, bilingual and trilingual cantons, with recognition of 4 linguistic areas that are in principle monolingual.

As an example of applications in labelling resulting from the official recognition of multilingualism, we can quote the case of the *Federal Law on Consumer Information* of Switzerland dated October 5, 1990<sup>20</sup>. Article 2 obliged products to inform the consumer in the official languages of the country. This means, for example, the approximately 300,000 inhabitants of the canton of Ticino, even though they share the canton with a large German minority, have all products labelled in Italian.

This protection of languages on the labels of products even occurs in very small linguistic communications, and specifically for a certain region, not as a state-wide regulation. In south Tyrol, where the labelling of food products is a reality, the Italian government went even further by promoting the Legislative Decree of May 2001, No. 283<sup>21</sup>, so that the Italian-German bilingualism is guaranteed in the instructions for pharmaceutical products in the province of Bolzano/Bozen included in the Autonomous Region of South Tyrol, and the Italian Ministry of Health must guarantee the content of the information in two languages. This Decree was issued in agreement with Presidential Decree 574 of 1988 and contains the penalties to be applied if, after a six-month period of adaptation and information, for example, citizens do not have the instructions for a pharmaceutical product in German.

By considering the different European models we can affirm that, in comparison with the Catalan linguistic community, we cannot find in the European Union, and within countries with a democratic tradition and with economic development, any country with a comparable language regarding the number of speakers and vitality of use where this is not fully present on the labelling of all the basic products distributed within its territory. The Catalan linguistic community in Spain is an exception. Furthermore labelling the local language is extensively protected and guaranteed in some countries with linguistic communities with a far fewer number of speakers than Catalan.

### 3. Plurilingualism in the labelling of products in Catalonia: an exceptional situation

In regard to the Catalan linguistic community we can see that: in the case of Spain, Companies which in comparable environments act by applying the respective codes or legislation that protects the consumers of this community, ignore their own codes, under the coverage, it is true, of a legal loophole in this area; or better said by legislation that only guarantees the rights of one part of the consumers in the state: those that belong to the community whose language is Spanish.

<sup>18</sup> Available from [http://www.juridat.be/cgi\\_loi/loi\\_F.pl?cn=1991071430](http://www.juridat.be/cgi_loi/loi_F.pl?cn=1991071430) (last access April 2006)

<sup>19</sup> Approximate data from the University of Laval in Quebec. Available from <http://www.tlfq.ulaval.ca/axl/> (last access April 2006)

<sup>20</sup> Available from [http://www.admin.ch/ch/i/rs/c944\\_0.html](http://www.admin.ch/ch/i/rs/c944_0.html) (last access April 2006)

<sup>21</sup> Available from <http://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi/deleghe/testi/01283dl.htm> (last access April 2006)

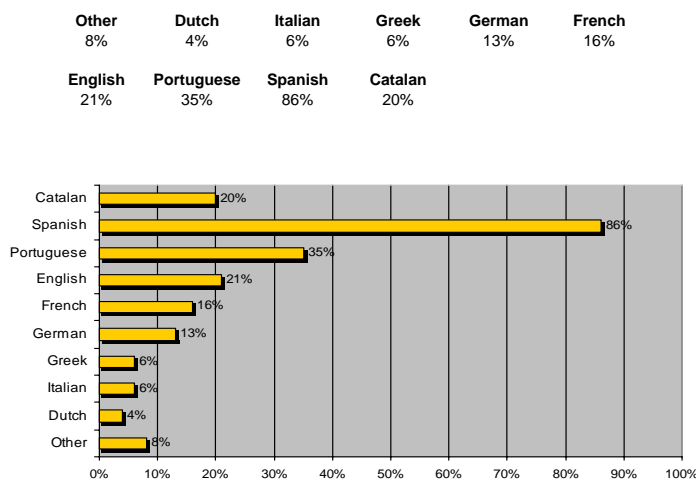






the Secretariat General of Linguistic Policy of the Generalitat of Catalonia. Wishing however to exemplify the use of plurilingualism on labels, we have considered the study conducted in 2004 by the Platform for Language on the languages on the labels of private-label products in Catalonia: *Les llengües d'ús en l'etiquetatge dels productes de marca blanca de supermercats i hipermercats a Catalunya. Autumn 2004*. Graph 3 shows the data according to presence (not percentage occupation of the label like in the 1992 study by Tudela) on 624 private-label products selected according to 30 typical large consumption products.

Graph 3  
Percentage of products in each language among private-label products in Catalonia. 2004. (Platform for Language)



This study made it evident that the use of plurilingualism was completely different depending on the private-label. Only some Catalan companies used Catalan; Bon Preu for example used it exclusively. Sorlidiscau use Catalan on practically all products, and it was also used widely by Condis and Caprabo. Eroski mainly labelled in four languages including Catalan. The others only labelled in Spanish (Mercadona or Supersol). Curiously, Portuguese, English and Greek were also used quite often. The plurilingualism of DIA consisted mainly of products labelled in Spanish, Portuguese and Greek at the same time. El Corte Inglés, which for the time being is only present in Spain and Portugal, mainly labelled in Spanish, Portuguese and English, even though after the study they began to label in Catalan the few products covered by current legislation.

Obviously there were cases of the use of many languages on the same label, but they did not include the official local language of the place of sale (Catalan), but languages that did not even have half the number of speakers in the place of origin, or even where there was a far greater lack of knowledge among the population of the territories where they were official (as is the case of Latvian). Some products in Lidl could be labelled in 20 different languages (Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, German, Greek, Dutch, Italian, Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Rumanian, Bulgarian, Lithuanian, Latvian) but not in Catalan. Carrefour also had products labelled in many languages but not in Catalan; for example in Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, German, Greek, Dutch, Italian, Czech, Polish, Slovak and Turkish. Caprabo, labelled only in Catalan in Catalonia, or only in Spanish, or sometimes in both languages. But Catalan never appeared in supermarkets outside the Catalan linguistic area; everything was exclusively labelled in Spanish. In general the first language used in Catalonia for labelling private-label products was Spanish and in second place Portuguese.

The second step was to analyse the reasons for this anomaly in the particular use of plurilingualism in labelling in Catalonia. Probably this point is a mixture of many aspects, both historical and social. In all the cases there is a confluence of two characteristic traits of Spain that do not occur at the same time in other comparable states in the European Union or similar countries. On the one hand there is a large number of speakers from different linguistic communities who use their language with full vitality and have a vast knowledge of the written language. And on the other there is no

various and partial in Catalonia, and the latest General study of 2004: *Estudi sociolingüístic als supermercats i hipermercats de Catalunya* by IPSOS Eco Consulting for the Department of Trade, Tourism and Consumer Affairs)

modern recognition in accordance with the principles of respect for this diversity; even though, on the other hand, the diversity is partially recognised in the Spanish Constitution (Article 3). Although this deficit may very occasionally be found in some other countries, as is the case of France (reflected in Article 2 of the Constitution which only recognises one official language for the whole republic), it does not occur in conjunction with the first condition. Therefore the Spanish case is completely atypical in the European context and probably among democratic and economically developed countries.

In Catalonia, Spanish, apart from Catalan products with Denomination of Origin (article 34.2 of Law 1/1998 for linguistic policy), is the only mandatory language on labels (Article 18 of Royal Decree 1334/1999), even though it is not the only official language, and not the local language. This unheard-of situation is accompanied by another condition: the obligation and presence of other languages seems to be exclusively dependent on Autonomous Governments where there are other official languages (Sentence 147/1996 of September 19, recognised that the autonomous communities with their own language had the faculty to legislate the obligatory condition). The Government of Spain only favours part of the citizens (Spanish speakers). It favours Spanish monolingualism at a level of the whole state, while it permits plurilingualism according to the decision of the corresponding Autonomous Governments, while ensuring nevertheless the presence of Spanish in these territories.

The responsibility in labelling and in safeguarding this right of the citizens of the Catalan linguistic community, falls therefore solely and exclusively on employers. This circumstance is completely atypical in the context of western and central Europe.

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