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**SEGMENTAL MARKETING AND LANGUAGE USE  
IN INDIA**

**M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.**

# Segmental Marketing and Language Use in India

## M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

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### Segmental Marketing

In some sense, segmental marketing *is* marketing. And yet there are several markers that distinguish segmental marketing from general marketing.

Segmental marketing is marketing products to special groups of people. These may be people practicing a variety of distinct professions, age groups, male or female, or ethnic or religious groups, people occupying a particular territory in India, NRIs, overseas migrant Indian labor force, etc. Agriculturalists form a special group to whom seeds, fertilizers, farm machinery, special clothing, etc., may be specially offered through ads that appeal to their sensitivity and needs. Beauty creams appeal to women, to cite a few examples.



## Seasonal Marketing

Segmental marketing becomes seasonal marketing in India on most occasions. For a civilization that celebrates life through festivals, marketing of products for the festive occasions becomes the major focus in our bazaars. As we have a good number of religious groups, retailing revolves around the religious themes as well. Big corporations with billions of rupees also take advantage of the festive seasons to sell their wares, to introduce special schemes and make as much money as possible within a short period.



There are also special products for the seasons – rainy, winter, and summer as well as wedding seasons.

### Major Challenge for the Ad Creator

Whether seasonal or truly segmental, still the major challenge for the ad creator is as follows: while making the ads specific to the group and special for the occasion, the ad should also draw the attention of significant others and preferably get them into the buying game laid before them by the ad. Making the brand name known among the groups is an important goal, but cashing in on the popularity and the special occasions is the ultimate goal.

This dual purpose demands a language that is inclusive even as it is specific. For example, a Ramzan sale in a cloth/garments market segment demands focus on the Muslim women in particular, while making the occasion open also for every one to buy things. Sale discount is advertised prominently, the Muslim brothers and sisters are greeted warmly, their pictures are prominently placed in the ad, and religious symbols are also introduced. All these may make the event mostly an Islamic one, but the businessman is focused on his business, and so he needs to introduce signals of welcome to others as well! A statement that every one is welcome is highlighted when the sale discount is prominently placed. Symbolically, items that are often used by Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, et al. may be shown as part of the visuals.

This is a very simple example, but the ad creator will have many up in his sleeve when he visits the bazaar and observes the behavior of both the businessmen and salesmen in the stores and the actual customers visiting the stores.

The ad creator needs to listen to the conversation and the type of vocabulary used in such conversations. A catchy phrase, sentence, or greeting distinct to the event or occasion is what needs to be identified and used. We all can make suggestions but the reality of the market is changing year by year and thus the ad creator needs to be really in the bazaar and be all ears to get the phrase that is understood by all as really fitting the mood of the event/festive occasion.

### **Linguistic Identity and Ethnic Identity**

Linguistic identity and ethnicity often coincide in Indian situations. So, a south Indian festival becomes an important occasion for the cloth traders of Kolkata, Mumbai, New Delhi or Ahmedabad to stock commodities that appeal to the south Indian taste. Likewise, shops specialize in “North Indian” commodities in south Indian towns to cater the desires of the “North Indian” population.

### **Some Icons of Segmental Marketing**

A Sikh farmer and the Bangra dance appear to be very well received in all parts of India, whereas young women in Bharata Natyam postures appeal to the middle class populations in major metropolitan cities as an icon of dignity and respect. Men in dancing postures in traditional garment and traditional dances of north India appeal to the North Indian market. Men are associated with classical dance in south India but their presentation in Bharata Natyam postures as symbols are not greatly appreciated in south India. Traditional dances of Kerala and Tulu Nadu in south India where characters wear large masks appeal well to the educated classes across linguistic groups in south India, but not to the rural people across linguistic groups in the same territory. However, in general, local folk dances in glittering costumes appeal to such audiences. Symbols of Kodava have not caught the imagination of the wider market across ethnic and linguistic groups yet. Undisputed leaders such as Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose are also acceptable icons all around. It is always safer to show their pictures because they are no more living. However, any one associated with the Muslim League that

demanding and was instrumental for the vivisection of India is not welcome. Seasonal marketing aimed at the Muslim clientele carefully focuses on Muslim women and family and not on any historical figures connected with the Muslim community in India.

### **Model Icons or Ambassadors of Big Business in India**



In recent years, we see big businesses are busy appointing film actors or “filmy” people as their ambassadors to promote their brand names and sale. These mostly “body-prominent” ambassadors do not communicate anything effectively about the product they are paid to promote. People look at them and their attractive bodies rather than the product they were hired to promote. If only some effective verbal message could be included in all such presentations, either live or in ads, the corporations will be able to reap some dividends.

### **Greetings – An important part of the communication**

The greetings specific to the festival or the event actually dominate the language use in all segmental marketing. Greetings or some such expression associated with the season will find a place in the ad at least in some corner to appeal to the clientele.

There is the danger of excessive dependence on greetings – groups that do not share the values of the occasion may be discouraged from participating in the buying-game laid before them. Also, specific address to specific divinities may also act as a great discouragement. For example, it is widely known that businessmen in small towns offer sale events in relation to temples owned by local castes. Members of other castes generally do not have much interest in such events, and this could act negatively on the effectiveness of the announcement of sale on others.

## Caste Considerations

While caste is a larger constituency that could attract a sizable number of clients, especially, when a caste is spread over several states just as we find in north India, excessive dependence on caste labels and caste occasions may actually work against increase in sales on such occasions. Moreover, caste markers such as sacred threads, rituals exclusive to certain castes, etc., may also act as a damper when values are not shared, or when such values are resisted in the consciousness of other castes. Some forty to fifty years ago, certain Tamil weeklies that focused on publishing stories with Brahmin characters, rituals, and festivals began to lose their prominence and sales when the non-Brahmin tide arose among the Tamils. The dailies and weeklies that changed their focus and became more inclusive remain in business even today.

Caste markers such as caste dialects could be an interesting addition to the ad, but the content should be so chosen with no emphasis on the caste displayed in the ad. Despite the continuing influence of castes, society at large is becoming more and more marked less in terms of caste in the public domain. Class character begins to assume a greater role in emerging urban India.

Indian society always had a special place and respect for the written language. Spoken idiom used in plays and poetry, etc. have had specific functions that did not occupy a central role in the story. Sanskrit playwrights such as Kalidasa used the slang of the working class for creating certain effects, and did not use slang as the main medium of expression. Even today the trend continues. The language used in Hindi movies is a good example. Standardized Hindi that uses slang but stands apart from it is the major character of Film Hindi. It uses Hindustani, Urdu, and even Hindi dialects of various sorts, and yet its main tool is a variety that heavily depends upon emerging Hindi with Sanskrit basis. This trend will continue to grow, as generations of school goers will master this variety and use it for various purposes. At the same time, love for the dialect is also growing as a mark of identity. An astute ad creator will take into consideration these trends and use the elements available to him appropriately to suit the content and characters of his message.

## Segmental Marketing of Matrimonial Ads



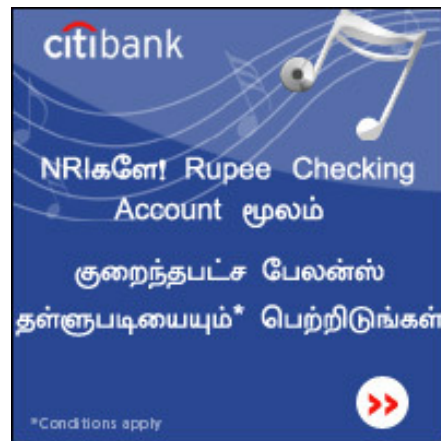
If the sale of general commodities tries to avoid caste markers in order to attract members of all castes as potential participants in the buying-game, matrimonial ads break their own grounds by cherishing caste markers and planting themselves firmly in the caste turf.

Caste is segmental, and spousal exchange in India is still more or less totally caste-based. So, a natural fit between segmental marketing and matrimonial ads readily exists. Spousal exchange is also an ethnic phenomenon, and ethnicity also thus is a very important part of this segmental marketing. There are many trans-provincial and trans-ethnic castes in northern India, and yet these also are part of the segmental marketing since they depend on caste as the basis of spousal exchange. On the other hand, in southern India, trans-provincial and trans-ethnic castes are few and far between. Castes that settled in another province for centuries more or less seek spousal arrangements within their own province. However, smaller number of spousal exchanges across trans-provincial and trans-ethnic/linguistic considerations does take place.

In whatever way we look at it, matrimonial ads offer us an excellent demonstration of segmental marketing, which is bound to grow even as the traditional method of personal or family contacts alone do not offer a better match.

### **Money Transfers and Telephone Usage**

Money transfer seems to be evolving into a great segmental marketing success in India and abroad. While Indians working in western nations seem to be more interested in saving as much as they can in U.S. dollars (since their ultimate goal is to settle in these countries of affluence and comfortable living, which provide greater freedom of enterprise), Indians working in the Persian Gulf have been traditionally sending money back home. (Their hard earned money actually saved India from bankruptcy in early 1990s.) For many years, banks, insurance companies, construction companies did not take advantage of this divide.



Currently, almost every company, including the mammoth Reliance India has entered into this segmental marketing with emotive slogans and colorful language. While there has been noted success, there have also been noted failures. A few years ago some credit

card companies in the United States started issuing credit cards with Indian motifs and identity, targeting Indians over there. But somehow this venture did not significantly succeed well, probably because in some contexts we do not really want to be over exhibitionist in public domains. An ordinary Visa or Master card will afford an opportunity to blend into the crowd in market places in the United States. Why add to the already visible marks of you being a foreigner by using a card that proclaims your loyalty to your home country! And then, especially after 9/11!

### **Ethnic Loyalty, Class Character, Urban and Rural Groups**

Jandt (2004 : 364) makes a significant observation:

One aspect of specialized media is segmented marketing. Even though each separate Asian-American ethnic group is a separate ethnic market with diverse languages and cultures, market researchers have concluded that Asian-American consumers value quality above price and convenience more so than the general population does. The median household income of Asian Americans was \$45,249—more than \$6,000 higher than White households—so advertisers' efforts have been directed at instilling brand loyalty.

*Cultural Awareness in advertising.* In advertising to the general population, Metropolitan Life Insurance Company of New York runs ads featuring the comic strip character Snoopy saying, "Get Met; it pays," but in its campaign directed at Chinese-Americans and Korean-Americans, the company stresses its prestige as well as Asian values such as financial security and family responsibility. Instead of showing Snoopy, it shows several massive office buildings owned by Metropolitan Life.

While ethnicity plays a crucial role in segmental marketing to the Indian Diaspora, class character, and the rural and urban divide seem to play a crucial role in segmental marketing in India. Each of these segmental marketing has its own distinct language markers. Hybrid language with English or Hindi as one of the components in the segmental marketing ad for the urban area is becoming popular and is more or less tolerated at least for the time being. Colloquial and rural dialectal expressions catch the attention of the people in small towns.

Some companies that have been in India for a long time, since the days of the British Raj, have established excellent brand names, such as Lipton, BrookeBond, (Hindustan) Lever, Colgate, Tata, etc. However, we also notice that there have been many more Indian companies that came into being after Indian Independence, which also have established dynamic brand names that penetrate household everywhere in India. Reliance is one such brand, Bajaj is another (existed before Independence). Tata Tea is relatively a recent brand. Most of these brands have focused on urban clientele, but have gradually penetrated



into the rural markets as well. In their progress, they have acquired the scent of the rural language use in their ads.

We still need to understand and exploit the values of Indian society for segmental marketing. It is a field that beckons the best creative talent similar to the talent that created the folk music turn in the Indian movies in the recent past. Language use is going to play a very important role in this significant turn.

### Language Use

The concepts of dialect, register, regional and social dialects, spoken language/written language, slang, argot, etc., all play an important part in the creation of effective segmental marketing ads. Since spoken idiom may not be wholly understood across regions and communities, the burden of the visual is heavier when spoken form or the slang is used. Also slang needs an acquaintance with the usage conventions in various groups and so it is likely that the effectiveness of the slang as a marketing tool will depend upon its currency and popularity through other media such as the movies and TV serials. Accordingly, one does not aim at repeating such ads after the lapse of the period during which the slang is instantly understood.

### To Conclude



Segmental marketing is managed well by an understanding of the processes of language use. But, then, language alone will never be the dominant feature in any segmental marketing.

## REFERENCE

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