

## VOICE-OVERS IN STANDARDIZED ENGLISH AND SPANISH TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

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Our aim in this article is to explore the paralinguistic characteristics of voices in voice-overs in a corpus of English and Spanish TV ads. Our underlying premise is that voice-overs, just like linguistic messages, images and music, convey information which is picked up by viewers whether at a conscious or subconscious level. In our analysis we attempt to find what patterns, if any, can be discovered in our corpus of voice-overs with regard to a number of parameters such as gender, accent, age and voice-quality. To this end we gathered data on our corpus of voice-overs through questionnaires completed by native English and Spanish informants respectively. The analysis we have carried out goes beyond previous research into voice-overs which either centres on one of the above parameters in isolation or which makes use of the intuitions of researchers using limited samples of TV ads. Our findings reveal that prestigious accents predominate in both the English and Spanish voice-overs. We also discovered that female voices are perceived to be younger than those of their male counterparts and voice characteristics such as pitch, breathiness, assertiveness and others also seem to correlate with the gender of the speaker.

Keywords: advertising; television; voice; gender; age; accent

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### LA VOZ EN OFF EN ANUNCIOS TELEVISIVOS ESTANDARIZADOS EN INGLÉS Y ESPAÑOL

*El objetivo de este artículo es llevar a cabo un estudio de los aspectos paralingüísticos de la voz en un corpus de voces en off de anuncios televisivos en inglés y en español. Partimos de la creencia de que las voces en off, del mismo modo que ocurre con el mensaje lingüístico, las imágenes o la música en un anuncio, transmiten determinada información que la audiencia recupera a un nivel consciente o subconsciente. Con nuestro análisis pretendemos discernir los diferentes patrones de voces que se usan en nuestro corpus de anuncios prestando atención a las variables de género, acento, edad, y calidad de voz. Para obtener información sobre estos aspectos hemos distribuido un cuestionario a hablantes nativos del español y del inglés. Con nuestro análisis pretendemos solventar las deficiencias que presentan estudios existentes, los cuales, o bien se han centrado en el estudio aislado de una de las variables anteriormente mencionadas, o bien se han basado en las propias intuiciones de los investigadores en torno a un corpus muy reducido. Nuestros resultados ponen de manifiesto un predominio de los acentos más prestigiosos tanto en las voces en off en español como en inglés. Del mismo modo, hemos corroborado que los hablantes nativos que forman parte de la investigación perciben que las voces femeninas pertenecen a individuos más jóvenes que en el caso de sus homólogos masculinos. Igualmente, características tales como el tono, la aspiración, la asertividad y otros parecen estar íntimamente ligadas al género de la persona que habla.*

*Palabras clave: publicidad; televisión; voz; género; edad; acento*

## 1 Introduction

All the elements that make up television commercials, be they linguistic or otherwise, contribute to their overall goal which is ultimately to “sell something”, whether it is an idea or a product (Askehave and Swales 2001). However, it is the presence of extra-linguistic elements (Cook 2001) such as sound, moving images and paralinguistic elements like voice that set TV ads apart. A common trend in advertising practices nowadays (Cohen-Eliya and Hammer 2004) is to produce commercials in which what is implied is more important than what is explicitly stated. A consequence of this is that overt linguistic messages are becoming more peripheral and extra- and paralinguistic factors more central (Cook 2001: 37). This ties in with the main aim of this article, which is to compare the paralinguistic characteristics of voices in voice-overs in a corpus of English and Spanish TV ads. We believe that – just like images and music, which have been studied extensively in the context of TV advertising – the paralinguistic characteristics of the voices employed by advertisers in voice-overs are also of key importance as a means of conveying information to viewers and shaping their attitudes, at a conscious or sub-conscious level, about the products being advertised. As a result, they deserve to be analyzed in greater depth if we are to obtain a better understanding of how information is transmitted in TV ads. For that reason, our aim is to discover what information is conveyed to viewers through voice-overs in both English and Spanish TV ads and in what ways, if any, the characteristics of the voice-overs differ from one language to another. The parameters we will focus on here are the speaker’s gender, accent, age and other less tangible, but nonetheless important, characteristics such as his/her emotional state or personality.

To carry out our analysis, given that it is unfeasible to ask every single viewer for his/her opinion, we were faced with two possible alternatives. The first was to use our own intuitions about voice-overs and the second to gather the insights of independent non-specialist informants. For greater objectivity, we have chosen the second alternative as we believe that what non-specialist informants pick up when listening to voice-overs will undoubtedly give us a more impartial and clearer idea of what the public in general perceives than the opinion of trained linguists.

The structure of the rest of this article is as follows. In section two we present a brief overview of the existing research into the meanings that voices can convey and in section three we focus on the research into the types of voices used in voice-overs in TV ads. Section four consists of a detailed description of our corpus and how it was gathered, followed, in section five, by an account of the demographics of our group of informants, and an explanation of the methodology by which we gathered our data. In section six we detail the results obtained through the questionnaires completed by our informants. Section seven includes a discussion on the results for each language with special emphasis on the differences and similarities between them. Finally, we offer a series of concluding remarks that connect our findings with research into the ideological bias of TV ads.

## 2. Voices as a carrier of meaning

In this article we are not concerned with what is undoubtedly the main function of voice-overs in TV ads, i.e. to transmit verbal messages which “mediate and establish ‘space’ between screen event and viewer” (Stigel 2001: 329). What we *are* interested in is that extra level of potential meaning embodied in the physical substance of voices in general and especially in voices employed in voice-overs. In face-to-face interaction, phone conversations or communication through other types of electronic media, we unintentionally supply those who hear our voices with information on our geographical origin, social class, gender, age, emotions or even our state of health. Wilson and Wharton (2006: 1561) call involuntary information of this kind a “natural sign” (cf. “informative signal”, Lyons 1977: 33). The acoustic data that tell us where a person is from or that he/she has a cold or is angry are not inherently communicative but “convey information by providing evidence for it” (Wilson and Wharton 2006: 1564). Natural signs stand in contrast to both “linguistic signals” proper, which encode conceptual meanings, and “natural signals”, which are “inherently communicative, and convey information by coding” as in the case of intonation and sentence stress (Wilson and Wharton 2006: 1564).

It is, of course, possible to manipulate natural signs as in the case of a working-class person in England who ‘puts on’ an RP accent in an interview in order to have a better chance of getting a job. In such situations natural signs become *communicative* to use Lyons’ (1977: 33) term (cf. Laver and Trudgill 1979). Wilson and Wharton (2006: 1563) give the example of a woman saying “*Jack is late*” in an angry voice. The speaker would be interpreted as meaning not only that Jack was late but that she was angry about it. We argue that in TV ads, the conscious manipulation of voices, on the part of the producers of advertisements, also adds meaning to whatever message is being transmitted. In other words, it is impossible to divorce the message from the medium, that is, voice. For example, when a young male voice-over specialist is chosen instead of an older man, or indeed a woman, or when an actor is instructed to perform a voice-over with a deep breathy voice instead of using a more normal type of phonation, these are *de facto* cases of voice manipulation which, from our point of view, have been carefully designed to suit the advertiser’s message.

## 3. Voice-types in voice-overs in TV ads

Our analysis of meanings conveyed by voice-overs, which we describe in section six, builds on previous research in several fields including linguistics, gender studies, social psychology, anthropology, marketing and advertising. Following Laver and Trudgill (1979: 3) we will look at voice using the categories listed below:

- (a) those that mark social characteristics, such as regional affiliation, social status, educational status, occupation and social role;
- (b) those that mark physical characteristics, such as age, sex, physique and state of health;

- (c) those that mark psychological characteristics of personality and affective state.

By far the greatest amount of research on voice-overs in TV ads has been carried out on gender bias. All the literature on this topic to date (Courtney and Whipple 1974; McArthur and Resko 1975; O'Donnell and O'Donnell 1978; Manstead and McCulloch 1981; Downs and Harrison 1985; Livingstone and Green 1986; Bretl and Cantor 1988; Furnham and Voli 1989; Mazzella *et al.* 1992; Furnham and Bitar 1993; Neto and Pinto 1998) points to the fact that “authoritative voices advising you what to buy are nearly all men’s voices” (Kimmel 2003: 165).

The only exception to this general rule is to be found in the voice-overs for traditionally female products (Dominick and Rauch 1972; Courtney and Whipple 1974; Marecek *et al.* 1978; Kimmel 2003; Pennock-Speck 2006; del Saz-Rubio and Pennock-Speck 2008). Pennock-Speck (2006), for example, discovered in his corpus of English ads that products aimed exclusively at girls or women featured only female voice-overs whereas some products aimed exclusively at men did have female voices.

Beyond the male/female dichotomy, very little work has been done on classifying voice-overs in TV ads. Most of it attempts to find a correlation between geographical/social varieties of English with different types of products. Thomas and Wareing (1999: 182) point to the fact that advertisers use “country accents to indicate the wholesome nature of food products, or more prestigious accents such as RP to promote financial services”. In a similar vein, Montgomery (1995: 73) states that products that embody expertise will normally feature an RP accent or in some cases an American one while other products, especially food, where the emphasis is on natural ingredients, will use regional and especially rural accents. Arden (2003: 107), referring to beer ads during the Super Bowl, states that women in the ads speak with no identifiable accent as the advertisers do not wish to offend male viewers. None of the authors above make it clear whether they are referring to voice-overs or the voices of the characters in the ads themselves but RP and its American equivalent – a regionally neutral accent – are seen by them to be the default voice for more prestigious or technologically complex products, while rural voices embody wholesomeness. This is an over-simplification often found in comments on voice-overs but in general terms tenable.

Pennock-Speck’s (2006) analysis of the geographical/social factor in voice-overs is without doubt the most detailed to date as it involves the analysis of a corpus of 85 ads in English from three MTV channels broadcast in the UK and the rest of Europe, on the one hand, and 263 ads from several Spanish terrestrial channels broadcast in Spain. In his Spanish corpus only one of 263 ads used a regional voice-over. The situation was very different in the English corpus, where 56% featured RP followed by Standard American 20%, Estuary English 16%, and others 6%. Looking at the results of his analysis, it became apparent that to find correlations between geographical accents and product types, the age factor had to be taken into account (Pennock-Speck 2006: 975). His analysis showed that young RP voices were mostly encountered in mobile ringtone ads, skin care and CDs while RP voices overlapped with young Estuary English voices in advertising music and skin care products. Most of the Estuary English voice-overs – the

majority of which were younger voices – were heard in ads for mobiles, music and skin care. Of the rest of the accents in his corpus, Pennock-Speck (2006) found that American voice-overs were mostly male and of indeterminate age – neither overtly young nor old – and were heard almost exclusively in ads promoting films or DVDs.

With regard to age alone in the English corpus, indeterminate voices made up the majority 51.2% while younger voices come a close second. Overtly older voices were extremely rare (Pennock-Speck 2006: 976). In the Spanish corpus indeterminately aged voice-overs were found in over 80% of the ads while there was a very small number of overtly older voices. However, young voices were predominant in female hygiene ads and in non-alcoholic drink and ring-tone ads (Pennock-Speck 2006: 977).

There is very little research into voice-quality in TV ads or, to be more precise, in discourse analysis in general, possibly because of the great difficulty in identifying different voice types on the bases of phonetic criteria alone. In the field of linguistics, there is very little written on the significance of physical and psychological characteristics in voices and most of it relies on the researchers' intuition. However, a sizeable amount of empirical work has been done in anthropology by using informants' perception of voice-quality, especially on what types of voices are considered to be attractive. Having an attractive voice can be an asset. Hughes, Dispenza and Gallup (2004: 302), citing research by Zuckerman and Driver (1989), state that people "with attractive voices are perceived more favourably and as having more desirable personality characteristics" than those with unattractive voices. Deep male voices are frequently rated as attractive (Zuckerman and Driver 1989; Collins 2000; Riding, Lonsdale and Brown 2006). Hughes, Franco Dispenza and Gallup (2004: 303) state that this may be due to the fact that a deep voice is "an important parameter of mate choice" from an evolutionary point of view – a point also made by Romáine (1999: 49). Females may, therefore, relate to voices at an unconscious level because they are predisposed to do so due to evolutionary processes. Deep voices, which are characteristically male, are also associated with dominance in both humans and animals (Ohala 1983: 7). A cultural correlate of dominance is authority, so lowness of pitch may be the objective acoustic trait underlying this subjective label. This might explain the prevalence of male voices in voice-overs, although Cameron (2000a: 16) mentions the case of one English ad featuring a female voice "whose low pitch and advanced received pronunciation marks hers as a voice of authority". However, the very fact she singles this ad out suggests that it constitutes an exception rather than the rule.

In general, Pennock-Speck (2006) found that in both his English and Spanish corpora deep male voices are much more common than deep female ones. For certain products deep male voices feature in practically every ad. This is the case with regard to TV ads for films and DVDs in his English corpus, where nine out of the ten spots featured voices of this kind.

Most of the research into voice quality and gender acknowledges the fact that there are voice characteristics, aside from pitch, which are perceived as being stereotypically male or female. One kind which has been related to a female stereotype is the 'smiley' voice. According to Cameron in her study on call centres, women have the ability to "smile down the phone" (2000a: 118) and are chosen for that quality. Following Henley (1986: 171), she views smiling as a subservient behaviour and affirms that in the research

carried out in call centres women are “routinely expected to smile” (Cameron 2000b: 334). In fact, “smiling and using expressive intonation are symbolically feminine behaviours” (Cameron 2000b: 334). We understand that in this context *symbolically* is a synonym of *stereotypically*.

Likewise, the breathy voice, which has traditionally been associated with sex (Henton and Bladon 1988; Cruttendon 1986; Graddol and Swann 1989; Salzmann 1993; Bate and Bowker 1997; Gobl and Ní Chasaide 2000), has also been stereotypically linked to women (Addington 1971; Berguall, Bing and Freed 1996; Bate and Bowker 1997). Pennock-Speck’s (2006) findings showed that both male and female breathy voices featured to a much greater extent in personal hygiene products than for other products. In his Spanish corpus Pennock-Speck (2006) found there was a higher proportion of breathy/deep voices in film trailers while all the perfume ads featured some kind of special trait, i.e. deep, breathy, sensual or foreign voices. The only two explicitly sex-related ads in the Spanish corpus featured ostensibly sensual whispery voices. A whispery voice, which is closely related to a breathy voice, can be heard in both men’s and women’s speech and can occur “during sexual arousal” (Laver 1975: 298). Therefore, its use in ads of this kind is probably designed so audiences will infer some connection with sex.

#### 4. Selection and Description of Corpus

The overriding criteria in gathering together our present corpus has been to select only commercials that feature voice-overs that meet the criteria laid out in Stigel (2001: 336), that is, voices which are “not visible nor synchronously anchored in a depicted speaking person”. Thus, during the selection of the corpus we found it necessary to eliminate some border-line cases which might be thought to involve a voice-over proper. For example, some commercials which, *prima facie*, might seem to involve voice-overs that fit Stigel’s definition (2001) constitute, in fact, the stream of consciousness of an on-screen character as is the case in the *Johnson’s Baby Oil* and *Bourjois* lipstick commercials. We have not included those cases either in which an on-screen character disappears into the background while his/her voice is still heard, even though they blur the edges of the distinction between the voice of a character and a true voice-over. Thus, if the owner of a voice appears, that voice cannot constitute a voice-over.

To reduce the number of variables in our analysis that have little to do with voice we include only “standardized” TV ads (Whitelock and Rey 1998) in our corpus. Standardized ads are made for an international market and are originally broadcast in English in the UK or USA and dubbed into many other languages, including Peninsular Spanish. Following Whitelock and Rey, who analyzed English and French TV ads, we treat ads as standardized if they are identical or if the differences between the original and the dubbed version are “minor” (Whitelock and Rey: 1998: 264). For instance, if differences in a translation are due to different connotations in either language, we treat them as standardized. Whitelock and Rey (1998: 264) cite the French translation *innovation*, which they say has a more technological connotation in that language than the word *new* in the English version which has a much broader and less specialized

meaning. Logically, the producers of standardized ads, which have to be translated into several languages, steer clear of difficult-to-translate idioms, similes, metaphors and plays on words during their creation. Whitelock and Rey treat ads which are shorter than the original as only “partially standardized” (1998: 260) which, according to them, has to do with a smaller target audience. However, we would argue that this cannot explain why, for example, most of the *L’Oreal* ads in our corpus are the same length as their English counterparts, except one – *Glam Shine* – and that the *Gillette Venus* ad is actually longer in Spanish than in English. We believe that ads may be shortened for any number of reasons we are not privy to but, as our criterion for including an ad in our corpus is that the dubbed version should be virtually identical to the original, we have decided to treat ads which are not identical in length as standardized and have therefore incorporated them into our corpus. Thus, seven of the eighteen dubbed ads in our corpus are shorter than the originals while one is longer. The shortening of the Spanish ads is mainly carried out through cropping scenes – not omitting them – leaving the visual narrative and messages intact. Only in the *Sunsilk for Silky Straight Hair*, in which three fellow workers basically tell a new girl that “her hair looks a mess”, is one of the scenes completely excluded. However, as all three characters say practically the same thing, the narrative line of the ad is not unduly altered.

Our corpus can be divided into beauty products and hygiene products although the differences between the two are often quite blurred, that is, a dandruff shampoo is both a hygiene product and improves the way we look. Dividing the corpus on gender lines, there are just four products targeted at men: *Gillette Mach 3 Turbo*, *Gillette Sensor 3*, *Head and Shoulders* and *Just for Men*; and 13 for women: *Clean and Clear*, *Dove Deodorant*, *Gillette Venus*, *Johnson’s Holiday Skin*, *L’Oreal Architechte*, *L’Oreal Couleur Experte*, *L’Oreal ElVive Smooth Intense*, *L’Oreal Glam Shine*, *L’Oreal Revitalift*, *Nivea Body Smoothing and Sculpting Cream*, *Sunsilk Styling*, *Sunsilk for Straight Hair* and *Tampax*. The larger number of beauty and hygiene ads promoting products aimed at women – more than three times as many in this corpus – is not limited to standardized ads but is a generalized trend (Kilbourne 1999).

All the products in our corpus belong to multinational companies which rank high in their spending on advertising.<sup>1</sup> Proctor and Gamble, who produce *Gillette*, *Gillette Venus* and *Tampax*, are the biggest world spenders, followed by Unilever, the makers of *Dove* and *Sunsilk*. *L’Oreal* is in fifth place and Johnson and Johnson, who market *Clean and Clear*, *Johnson’s Holiday Skin*, are ranked in tenth place. The other ads promote products belonging to the Tchibo Holding company, which is in 37<sup>th</sup> place: *Nivea Body Smoothing and Sculpting Cream*; and finally, *Just for Men*, marketed by Combe Incorporated, a company just below the top one hundred. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that companies with the advertising clout of the above should make up the majority of the products advertised in our corpus.

The preponderance of the *L’Oreal* ads in this corpus can be explained by the fact that although it is ‘only’ the fifth biggest spender on advertising world-wide, it is a company dedicated solely to beauty products, whereas the biggest spenders such as Unilever and Proctor and Gamble have a wide range of products.

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<sup>1</sup> Advertising Age's 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Global Marketers. [http://adage.com/article?article\\_id=113350](http://adage.com/article?article_id=113350)

### 5. Methodology: administration of the questionnaire

In order to come to a description of the voice-overs in both the English and Spanish sub-corpora, we had twelve native English-speaking informants and twelve native Spanish-speaking informants fill out a questionnaire on the voice-overs while they listened to the sound track from the eighteen ads in our corpus in their respective languages. Our informants are both male and female with ages ranging from seventeen to over seventy from several socio-economic backgrounds. Our purpose in using a wide range of informants was not to carry out an analysis based on the social status, age or gender of the informants, but simply to base the description of the voice-overs on the judgments of informants, not on our own intuitions. The demographic make up of the English and Spanish informants was not identical, although these were very similar in age and level of education attained, as shown in table 1. The informants differ slightly more with regard to their occupations.

	English	Spanish
	Age	Age
Up to 25	5	5
25 to 40	1	3
Over 40	6	6
Average Age	39	33
	Education	Education
Post-graduate	2	4
Undergraduate	3	3
Secondary School	7	5
	Occupation	Occupation
Skilled workers	3	4
Unskilled workers	1	2
Students	4	3
Pensioners	3	1
Housewives	1	2

Table 1. Informant demographics

The questionnaire was divided into three sections: the age of the speaker in the TV ad, his/her gender and a description of the voice-overs by using several labels. The informants were allowed to hear each ad as many times as they wished. In the age and accent sections the informants had to choose only one of the possible alternatives. Age, in both the Spanish and English questionnaires, was divided into three groups: *up to 25*, *25 to 40* and *over 40*. In the English questionnaire the descriptions for accents were *RP*, *Advanced RP*, *American* and *other*. We used the descriptors *RP* and *American* as we found that the majority of voice-overs in previous research (Pennock-Speck 2006) belonged to these categories. *Advanced RP* was included to designate the accent which includes recent innovations in RP instead of Estuary English, as in Pennock-Speck (2006), because unlike the corpus of ads in that article, many of which were taken from MTV, none of the ads in this corpus could be described with any certainty as Estuary English. Only the terms *RP* and *Advanced RP* were explained to the informants, as the

other two terms were clear. For Spanish accents we used the labels *standard*, *regional* and *other*. Following the findings in Pennock-Speck (2006), which showed that accents other than Standard Spanish are extremely rare, we did not feel it was necessary to use more labels.

Before administering the questionnaire we decided on the descriptors for voice quality, phonation types and labels of a more subjective nature using terminology from previous research as well as our own (Pennock-Speck 2006; del Saz-Rubio and Pennock-Speck 2008) and the descriptions supplied by colleagues who had previously listened to the voice-overs in the ads. The complete set of labels we used was as follows: *deep*, *breathy*, *husky*, *sensual*, *flirty*, *authoritative*, *assertive*, *aggressive*, *serious*, *cheeky*, *playful*, *happy*, *optimistic* and *neutral*. Informants were instructed to grade only the voice qualities that they felt were relevant on a scale from one to five.

## 6 Results and Analysis of the Voice-Over Questionnaire

In this section we will look at the results for the English and Spanish corpora separately but we will leave a comparison between the two until section seven.

### 6.1 Results for English Corpus

The results for age in the male and female voice-overs in the English corpus are significant. For female voices the informants assign 30.5% to the *up-to-25* age group, 63% to the *from 25 to 40* age group and under 6.5% for voice-overs to the *over 40* age group. These results are quite different when compared to those for male voice-overs with less than 10% for those *up to 25* and the rest more or less equally distributed between the age groups ranging *from 25 to 40* and *over 40*. The results for accents show an overwhelming ascendancy of the RP accent for both female and male voices (over 73%) followed by Advanced RP (21%), and around 5% for American and other accents.

When comparing the results for the genders with regard to voice quality, women are marked, compared to men, for sensual, flirty, cheeky, playful, happy and optimistic voices, whereas men are marked, compared to women, for deep, breathy/whispery, husky, authoritative and assertive voices. Figure 1 below illustrates these results.

Looking more closely at voice-overs and their correlation with specific products and brands, the first striking result is that the *L'Oreal* ads all featured male voice-overs alongside female celebrities. This contradicts the findings of the researchers reported above, who found that female voice-overs were the default choice in ads for products aimed at women. Moreover, the male voices in the *L'Oreal* ads were, on average, considerably deeper, huskier, breathier and more sensual than the male voices employed for products targeted at men. However, the male voices for ads promoting the four products targeted at men were more marked for the characteristics: authoritative, assertive, aggressive and serious.

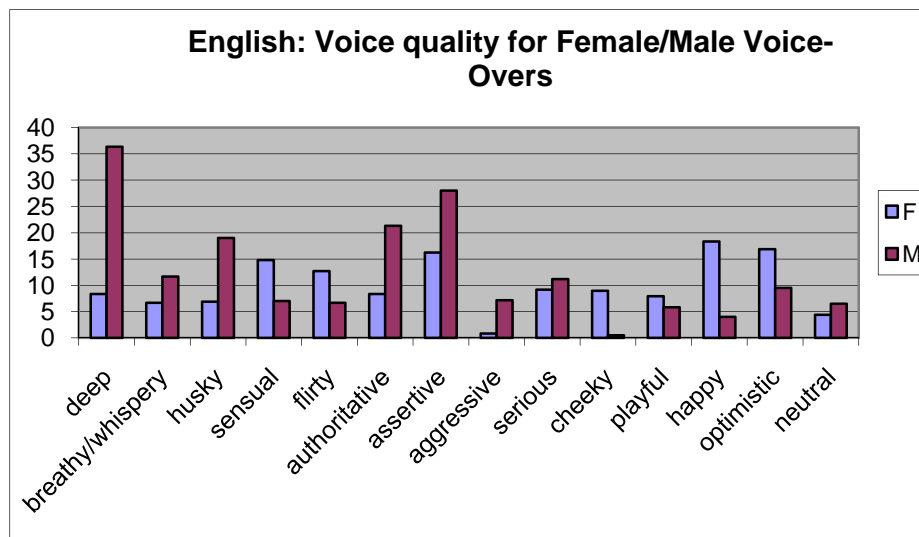


Figure 1. Results for male & female voice quality in voice-overs in English commercials

As in previous research (Pennock-Speck 2006; del Saz-Rubio and Pennock-Speck 2008) the *Tampax* ad in this corpus featured a very up-beat and optimistic female voice-over which seems to be typical for this kind of product. Other ads addressing problems in female hygiene and beauty also used up-beat voice-overs: *Clean and Clear*, a spot remover; *Dove Deodorant*, a product which prevents skin chaffing and *Nivea*, which reduces the problem of orange-peel skin. *Johnson's Holiday Skin* also includes a very up-beat voice-over but is more a beauty enhancer than a problem solver unless one considers paleness a problem.

When looking at the results from the questionnaires, it is worth bearing in mind that there is a time dimension to TV ads. When observing the informants we found that they rarely listened to the recordings and then ticked the boxes but rather made their choices while listening to the ad. Although in some of the ads the voice-overs attempt to maintain one particular mood, others seem to be divided into finite sections depending on the communicative purpose of a particular excerpt, for example, the voice-over for the description of a problem in the *Sunsilk for Silky Straight Hair* is not the same as that of the solution to said problem (cf. Alcoba-Rueda and Poch-Olivé 2005: 41 for Spanish radio ads). This would also explain why in the *Dove Deodorant* ad the voice-over is described as husky and sensual and, on the other hand, optimistic.

## 6.2 Results for Spanish Corpus

For the Spanish corpus only 5% of the ads with male voices were deemed to be in the *up to 25* age group, whereas 62.5% were in the *from 25 to 40* group and 32.5%, in the *over 40* group. In the case of female voice-overs, considerably more, 19%, belonged to

under-25s, whereas 66.5% were judged to be between 25 and 40 and only 14.5% over 40. With regard to accent, the hegemony of a neutral or Standard Spanish is almost total: 99.6%, which confirms previous research carried out by Pennock-Speck (2006).

The results for voice quality showed clear differences between the categories of female and male. Women are marked compared to men for breathy/whispery, sensual, flirty, playful, happy and optimistic voices, whereas men are marked for deep, authoritative and assertive voices (see figure 2).

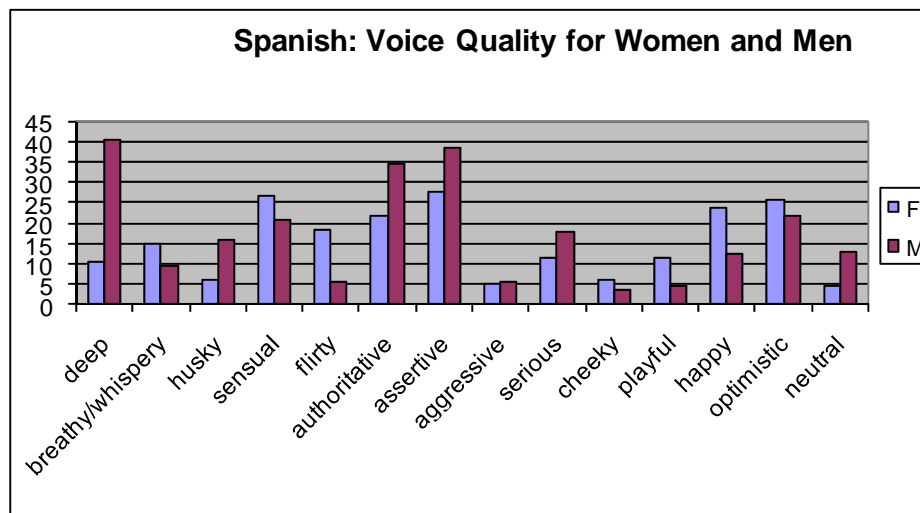


Figure 2. Results for male & female voice quality in voice-overs in Spanish commercials

If we focus on individual ads in the Spanish corpus, the *L'Oreal* ads featuring male voice-overs and female celebrities are, as in the case of the *L'Oreal* ads in English, even more marked for deep, breathy, husky and sensual male voice-overs than the male voices in the ads for products targeted at men. As is the case with its English counterpart, the *Couleur Experte* ad, which does not feature a celebrity, has low results for deep voice. This probably indicates nothing more than a different strategy for this particular product, but the fact that this is also true for the ad in English is interesting. There are three ads which are marked for optimistic characteristics, *Sunsilk Straight Hair*, *Sunsilk Spray* and *Tampax*. The first two ads involve problems. In the first TV ad, we are shown a woman who wants to straighten her frizzy hair; the solution is effected almost literally through a *deus ex machina* figure whose gigantic hand holds the solution to her problem, a can of hair spray which appears in response to her exclamation: "Oh, God" in Spanish. The second features a woman whose poor hair condition is remarked on by several of her colleagues. As we have already pointed out in our analysis of the identical English *Tampax* ad above, up-beat voices may be employed to address issues which are felt to be problematic, such as problems as different as frizzy hair and menstruation.

## 7 Discussion

The comparison of the English and Spanish results reveals that it is only in the case of accent that real differences can be found between the two corpora. For the English corpus our analysis confirms previous research which shows that the predominant accent in TV ads in English is RP. It is almost a given in research into TV ads that a prestige accent like RP (Hughes and Trudgill 1996: 3) would be the accent chosen by producers of commercials given the authoritative framing role of voice-overs, although other accents are also used as we have seen in the research reported in section three. This is not true of the Spanish corpus where we have discovered that regional accents play an insignificant role in Peninsular Spanish ads. This might be because the standard Spanish accent is perceived as being the only one with authoritative characteristics. Another possible reason is that, apart from embodying the voice of authority as in the case of RP, advertisers believe that the regionally neutral Spanish accent used in voice-overs will not distract the viewer from the message.<sup>2</sup>

Our findings also seem to back up previous research with regard to the prevalence of male voice-overs compared to their female counterparts in both English and Spanish TV ads. We expected similar results for both languages here. After all, it would have been surprising to find that female voices were used instead of male voices or vice-versa in the Spanish ads. However, it is interesting to note that male voice-overs outnumber female voice-overs even in the case of products for female end-users, contradicting previous research which states that ads for products targeted at women generally feature female voices. This can be explained by the fact that the *L'Oreal* ads, which make up a sizeable part of our corpus, all employ authoritative male voice-overs combined with beautiful female celebrities. These results show that one needs to be extremely careful when generalizing about voice-overs as a particular advertising strategy might deliberately go against a general tendency to achieve a particular effect.

Looking at the results for gender and age we found that the percentage of young female voices in the English corpus was three times higher than young male voices, while older male voices were four times more common than their older female counterparts. The Spanish results were similar, with three times more young female voices than young male voices and twice as many older male than older female voices. These results can be compared with those for 275 Spanish ads in Pennock-Speck (2006), in which it was found that young female voices were also much more common at 27.5% than young male voices at 9.5%. The differences between the genders, with regard to the perceived age of the voice-over actors, parallel the fact that young women appear significantly more often than young men in TV ads (Dominick and Rauch 1972; Courtney and Whipple 1974; Gilly 1988; Siu and Au 1997; Furnham and Mak 1999). It would seem that younger women, whether we are talking about their image or their voice, sell better than older women in both English and Spanish. In most patriarchal societies, the voice of wisdom is still today the domain of older men while women seem

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<sup>2</sup> In several web pages for Spanish voice-over professionals, a neutral accent is put forward as a merit, as are versatility and elegance. [http://www.voice-over.ws/con\\_loc.asp?idioma=1](http://www.voice-over.ws/con_loc.asp?idioma=1)

to be more valued for their physical beauty. Our results show that this is also the case in the standardized TV ads in our corpus.

Probably the greatest contribution to research on voice-overs in this article lies in our analysis of voice quality. Contrary to most of the insights into voice quality in previous research, which is anecdotal and based mainly on intuition (Karpf 2005; Thomas and Wareing 1999; Montgomery 2005), our results have been garnered from the analysis of informants' perceptions of a corpus of ads which show that voice-overs are quite different in both the English and Spanish ads when we looked at the genders separately. The marked characteristics for male voice-overs, deep, breathy/whispery, husky, authoritative and assertive, seem to tie in well with stereotypical views of the male voice. Deep voices, as we have seen, have often been linked to voice attractiveness and authority in males and were much more marked for males than females. Our results for deep, breathy voices contradict what Karpf says about voice-overs in the 90s and beyond:

The booming 'announcer's voice' and the 'dark-brown' voice - a deep, smooth voice that makes every product sound like a sexual aid - have given way to a voice of the street. The advertising voice of today is more likely to be laid-back, and belong to a celebrity (...) or a stand-up comedian (2005: 252).

Two informants from each of the language groups mentioned that some of the male voice-overs sounded as if the product being sold had something to do with sex. This may have been due to the proliferation in both corpora of male voices that combined the features: *deep*, *husky* and *breathy/whispery* because, as has been pointed out in previous research, these features, vis-à-vis voice, are sex related. Our results for breathy voices show that men are marked for this characteristic in the English ads but women are marked in the Spanish ones. However, taking into account that men's voices are huskier in both languages, breathy phonation in general is more marked for male voices and may explain why informants from both language groups found some of the male voices sensual.

In both the English and Spanish corpora, male voices were deemed by the informants to be much more authoritative and assertive than female voices. This fits in both with the traditional image of men and the key role of voice-overs as the authoritative last word and it might also explain why men's voices are more common than women's in TV ads.

Most of the marked female voice-quality characteristics, i.e. sensual, assertive, happy and optimistic, also seem to fit in with the stereotypical images of women as sexual objects on the one hand, and subservient helpers on the other. Thus, women's voices were deemed to be, on the one hand, more sensual and flirtier and, on the other, cheekier, happier, more playful and more optimistic than men's in both the English and Spanish corpora. The only characteristic which does not fit in with the traditional female stereotype is *assertive*. However, this characteristic might find its explanation in the persuasive nature of commercials in general.

## 8. Concluding remarks

Our research demonstrates that non-specialist informants in two languages are capable of discerning clear patterns in the utilization of accents in TV ads and that they coincide to a great extent in their perception of the age of the voice-over specialists and the types of voice quality present in their voices. Given the consistency of our findings we believe that it is more than probable that the public in general are also able to perceive similar patterns in voice-overs. We also contend that our results point to the fact that the producers of TV ads are aware that the meanings conveyed by voice are shared by society in general and can be exploited in the promotion and sale of their products. As Laver and Trudgill (1979) and more recently Wilson and Wharton (2006) suggest, it seems from our results that paralinguistic qualities of voice do provide the listener with information just as linguistic messages, images, music, sounds, etc. do and should be taken into consideration if we are to give a full account of meaning in TV ads.

The question of whether viewers are actually manipulated by sounds and images is beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, we take the view that although viewers are not consciously aware of the messages transmitted to them through voice-overs, these messages are absorbed – albeit at a subconscious level. Research by Dietrich (1998), Cohen-Eliya and Hammer (2004) and del Saz-Rubio and Pennock Speck (2008) all allude to the conservative nature of TV ads and the use of stereotypes, among other strategies, to get their messages across. In this respect, the voice-overs in our corpus seem to conform to stereotypical characteristics with regard to gender: older, deep, authoritative male voices, younger, optimistic female voices, etc. As stated in the introduction, the objective of TV ads is to sell something and the producers of TV ads probably believe that the most efficient strategy is to tap into stereotypes held by viewers. We hope this article has contributed to the knowledge of one of the ways advertisers do this.

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