

EU Mandated Anti-Smoking Warnings in Belgium: Language Issues and Moving Beyond a "one size fits all"

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Abstract

Combined health warnings on tobacco packaging are commonplace amongst EU countries in 2018. This letter briefly describes some of the challenges that bi-and tri-lingual countries, such as Belgium, may face in the years to come.

Keywords: tobacco control, anti-smoking warnings, language, EU

"The greatest propaganda in the world is our mother tongue, that is what we learn as children, and which we learn unconsciously. That shapes our perceptions for life. That is propaganda at its most extreme form." [1]

The fatal impact of tobacco related disease [2] is such that it has been termed the "golden holocaust" [3], with an estimated global death toll of approximately 7 million annually [4]. The European Union (EU) has responded to this threat through various measures including the EU's Tobacco Products Directive [5]. Under this directive EU States are required to implement legislation that introduces combined graphical and text warnings. These combined warnings are based around 14 themes and include three sets of warnings to be used sequentially [5].

The importance of the text elements of such combined warnings should not be underestimated. Recent research suggests that text-warnings can be as effective as graphic warnings [6-7], or even potentially more effective [8]. Indirect evidence in support of the potential impact of such warnings may be seen in how

vociferously 'Big Tobacco' have fought both the inclusion of such warnings on packets and their content. The best example of this is the USA where the tobacco industry first opposed the introduction of such warnings in the 1960s on the basis of freedom of speech. However, after conceding a losing battle the industry managed to reduce the strength of the warning, as well as having it relegated to the side panel [9]. It should be remembered that the contemporary EU warnings feature boldly on both the front and pack of cigarette packets and, assuming a person smokes an average of 20 cigarettes a day, may be viewed 7,200 times per year [10-11]. In line with EU legislation these combined warnings in Belgium are given in three languages reflecting the officially trilingual nature of state (see Figure 1). The issue of language in Belgium is highly contested and divisive [12, 13] with the constitution explicitly addressing the language issue. The constitution discusses the federal and regional structure of the country, while article 2 states 'Belgium comprises three Communities: the Flemish Community, the French Community and the German-speaking Community'.

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Figure 1: One of the 42 EU mandated anti-smoking combined warnings used in Belgium

Article 4 of the Belgium Constitution clearly outlines the different linguistic zones within the country:

"Belgium comprises four linguistic regions: the Dutch-speaking region, the French speaking region, the bilingual region of Brussels-Capital and the German-speaking region. Each municipality of the Kingdom forms part of one of these linguistic regions. The boundaries of the four linguistic regions can only be changed or corrected by a law passed by a majority of the votes cast in each linguistic group in each House..."

The linguistic divisions in Belgium are so strong that there is acknowledged resistance to 'Dutch'- French/ French – 'Dutch' bilingualism within the state [12, 14].

It is widely accepted that effective health messaging, like advertising, requires brevity and almost instantaneous message interpretability. The question must be asked therefore

why the different linguistic regions of Belgium are all required to utilise health warnings which are uniformly given first in French, then in 'Dutch' and finally in German. This particular format is appropriate for the Walloon French speaking region and probably also for the Brussels bilingual region. However, in the Flemish region changing the language order to 'Dutch' then French, then German would appear advantageous. Similarly, in the German speaking region it would make sense to have such health warnings given first in German, then French, and finally in 'Dutch'.

The logistics and costs of such an initiative should not be a barrier as these will be borne by the tobacco companies. It should also be noted that although the German speaking minority is extremely small, constituting just 0.5% of the total population, the 'Dutch' speaking population constitutes 56% of the population of 11 million [15]. Given that EU legislation already requires country specific combi-

ned anti-smoking warnings for relatively small bilingual countries such as Malta (population approximately 420,000) and Luxembourg (population approximately 600,000), numbers would not appear to be a barrier.

Resumo

Kombinitaj sanavertoj sur tabakpakaĵoj estas kuitmaj en EU-landoj je 2018. Tiu ĉi letero mallonge priskribas kelkajn defiojn, kiuj eble devos esti solvitaj en du- kaj trilingvaj landoj, kiel ekzemple Belgio, dum la estontaj jaroj.

Conflicts of Interest

Authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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