A comparative analysis of the language used on labels of Champagne and Sparkling Water bottles.

This research essay focuses on the language used on labels of five Champagne and five Sparkling Water bottles. The two products are related, both being sparkling beverages, but also have obvious differences, primarily that one is alcoholic, as well as the occasions at which the beverages are consumed. The aim is to see the extent to which these differences affect the style of the writing, and whether there are any main differences or similarities in the language used. A range of brands and prices will be analysed to ensure an accurate view of the general language used on the labels, and linguistic features that will be investigated include lexis, grammar, foregrounded features, and textual relations.

I hypothesise that the language used on the Champagne labels will be complex and formal, to create an elaborate, sophisticated style. There will be more evaluative and descriptive modifiers and detail about where and how the wine is produced, to suggest quality and elegance, which appeal to the nature of the beverage, being a prestigious drink that is typically consumed at special occasions. The language used on the Sparkling Water labels will be less formal, with a more colloquial style, and simpler lexis. However, quality and merit of the drink will still be conveyed by the use of positive modifiers.

I began by looking at subject specific lexis, and found that Champagne labels contain more jargonistic vocabulary, such as: cava, fermentation, aperitif, mousse, cuvée (lines 4,12, 13, 32, 94), requiring knowledge of Champagne in order to be understood. Champagne labels also feature foreign lexis on the front of the bottles, particularly Spanish and French, to convey prestige and excellence: Fundada en 1882, Demi sec, À Reims France, Maison Fondée en 1772 (lines 22, 40, 67, 82). Sparkling Water, on the other hand, features only English lexis, and contains simpler vocabulary that is understandable without specialist knowledge: volcanic rock, filtration, spring, minerals, geological, sourced (lines 116, 159, 113, 160, 177, 177). The use of simple language makes the drink accessible to a range of consumers, as it avoids alienating them with language they may not understand.

According to readability statistics provided by Word, Sparkling Water labels contain 12.3 words per sentence, and 4% passive sentences compared to 18.3 words per sentence, and 27% passive sentences on Champagne labels. The Flesch reading ease however, is only slightly higher for Champagne, with a score of 44.5 compared to 43.0 for Sparkling Water labels. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade level is 11.6
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For Champagne labels, and 10.3 for Sparkling Water labels, showing that the readability of the language on Champagne bottles is more difficult in comparison to that of Sparkling Water labels. However, with regards to word length, Sparkling Water labels contain on average more characters per word (5.1) than labels of Champagne (4.9).

With regards to nouns, both types of beverage contain a large number of proper nouns, referring to the product's brand name: Clos Monistrol, Lanson, Badoit, and the locations where they are produced: Spain, France, Reims, Scotland, Italy (lines 12, 47, 91, 114, 154,177). Some Champagne labels also feature names of grape varieties, such as Chardonnay, Macabeo and Parelada (line 33).

Concrete nouns featured on the labels of both Champagne and Sparkling Water refer to the beverage and its origins: wine, vineyards, water, spring (lines 11, 91, 111, 113). Both sets of concrete nouns contain lexis connected with nature, particularly Sparkling Water: rains, rock, land, sunlight, minerals, world (lines 115, 116, 131, 135, 160, 161). Sparkling Water also contains concrete nouns connected with food and meals: food, meals, gourmets, dish (lines 120, 161 and 173, 173, 174), suggesting it is a good drink to accompany food.

Both types of beverage also feature numerous abstract nouns, with Champagne labels containing frequent references to time: years, century, months, time (lines 14 and 53, 31, 34, 75). Champagne labels also use abstract nouns to describe the wine: sparkle, complexity, freshness, length, excellence (lines 13, 34, 72, 73, 95), whereas Sparkling Water uses them to refer to the taste (line 174) and pleasure (line 180) that the consumer gets from drinking the water.

Across both texts nouns are generally pre-modified, consisting of one adjective followed by the noun: attractive sparkle, quality cavas, underground cellars, mineral water, protected estate (lines 13, 31, 34, 111, 117). Post-modified nouns, although few, tend to be followed by a phrase: vineyards in the heart of the Champagne region, land certified as organic (lines 91-92, 131). There are also some instances of both pre and post modified nouns: this delicious example is medium sweet, bottled on a protected estate owned by one family (48-49, 117-118).

Both sets of labels contain numerous adjectives and some superlatives, as well as verbs and nouns used as adjectives. Generally, Champagne contains more adjectives, including descriptive adjectives such as spatial adjectives: near, north-
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eastern, underground, northernmost (lines 11, 12, 34, 47) and colour adjectives: gold, black, yellow (lines 32, 68, 95). The focus is mainly on tradition and excellence, with the repeated use of traditional (lines 5, 11, 32) and the use of the superlatives oldest, finest and the best (lines 71, 90, 33) as well as the evaluative adjectives: excellent, fine, exceptional, and unique (lines 73, 32 and 50, 91, 48 and 93).

Adjectives used to describe Sparkling Water focus on naturalness, and perfection, with the adjective organic (lines 131 and 142), and repeated use of natural (lines 111, 132, 151, 159, 171) and perfect (lines 120, 160, 173). Purity is another quality that is conveyed by the superlative purest (line 114), adjectives pure and clear (lines 159,113), as well as the noun filtration (line 159), and the verb purified (line 116), which are both used as adjectives. The labels of Sparkling Water also feature numerous proper adjectives, referring to where the water is from, or the name of the spring from where the water originated: Caledonian, Scottish, Italian, French (lines 109, 115, 159, 173).

The majority of verbs used on both sets of labels refer to the production of the drink, and provide instructions on how to handle the bottle and its contents. Verbs used when describing production are mainly stative: contribute, ensure, find, satisfies, enhance, producing, undergoes (lines 48, 93, 120 and 147, 158, 174, 47, 12) or in the passive voice: sourced, filtered, drawn, produced, made, aged (lines 113 and 177, 115 and 131, 131, 11, 32, 34). Handling instructions contain more active verbs, such as: pointing (line 56), and the majority of these verbs are also in the imperative sentence mood, including: serve, open, enjoy, chill, store, use, keep (lines 13 and 161, 56 and 194, 50, 97, 134, 135, 192). The Champagne bottles also feature verbs when beginning to describe the wine: bears, displaying (lines 94, 73). A notable difference between the two texts is the verb used to refer to the consumption of the beverage, where the Champagne labels use the verb enjoy (lines 50, 53, 74), and Sparkling Water labels feature the verb use (lines 135, 192). This difference highlights that Champagne is a more luxurious, extravagant drink that one ‘enjoys’, and that Sparkling Water is a more everyday drink that one ‘uses’.

Interestingly, neither set of labels feature the word ‘drink’, as a noun or a verb.

Neither type of beverage contains a significant number of adverbs, however there are numerous adverbials. Champagne labels generally have more adverbials, mostly of manner, referring to how the wine is produced, or how to handle the bottle
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and its contents: open with care (lines 56, 192). There are also adverbials of place: aged…in our underground cellars (line 34) and time: founded in 1760 (line 71). Sparkling Water has more adverbials of place, referring to where the water originates, or where to store the drink: store in refrigerator (line 135), then manner: keep cool (line 192), then duration: owned…since 1508 (line 118). Champagne also has an adverbial of frequency: undergoes a second fermentation (line 12), and water has an adverbial of aspect: recommended by French gourmets (line 173), conveying prestige by referring to experts in the field of cuisine.

Foregrounded features are limited, with alliteration, a phonological feature: cool and constant, steady stream, superbly balanced blend (lines 50, 97, 160), and triples, a grammatical feature. Triples featured on Champagne labels are groups of three phrases: as an aperitif, with food, and at all celebrations; exceptional vineyards…dedicated vine-growers…and slow aging…(lines 75, 91-93), whereas triples on Sparkling Water labels are groups of three words, cool, clear, natural (line 113), again showing the simpler language and constructions used of labels of this beverage.

When considering textual relations, both texts are descriptive and written in the third person. The writer is detached from the text, and there is no indication as to whether the description of the beverage is the opinion of the writer, as it is written on behalf of the company. There is very limited 1st person use on labels of both wine and Sparkling Water, with two instances of the 1st person plural we on Champagne bottles: we recommend, we invite you (line 53, 98). We in these examples refers to the wine-making company. There is one example of the same type of use on Sparkling Water labels: …we’re sure (line 196), and there is also use of the first person singular: try me! (line 195). In the case, the bottle of water is being personified, as though the bottle is talking directly to the reader, an informal feature that is emphasized by the use of the exclamative sentence mood.

With regards to address, any reference to the reader tends to be indirect, in the form of imperatives: serve, open, enjoy (lines 13 and 161, 56 and 194, 50) and the passive voice: we recommend that it be consumed; Lanson Black Label can be enjoyed, best served chilled (lines 53, 74, 192). We invite you (line 98) is the only case of direct address on the wine labels with the use of the 2nd person personal pronoun you. Sparkling Water labels contains more frequent use of direct address,
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though it is still limited: you’ll find; the perfect complement to your meals; you’ll love (lines 120, 173, 196). The use of direct address on Sparkling Water bottles highlights its more informal tone.

To summarise, Champagne labels feature more complex language, with jargon and foreign lexis. Sentences are longer, with a higher readability score compared to that of Sparkling Water, due to complex constructions and passive sentences. Champagne labels also feature more modifiers, focusing on tradition and excellence. The tone of the language is formal, with little direct address or use of the first person.

The language on labels of Sparkling Water is more informal, with repeated direct address and easier vocabulary. Constructions are simpler, with limited passive voice. Although featuring fewer modifiers than Champagne, modifiers relate to nature, perfection and purity. Food and meals is also a foregrounded semantic field, focusing on everyday themes, again adding to its informality. These findings are analogous to the hypothesis; however the discovery that language on Sparkling Water labels contains more characters per word is unusual.

Although the analysis was successful, there were limitations to the study that could have influenced the findings. The main factor was the decision to analyse a range of priced beverages, as this meant that there was stylistic variation within the two groups of beverages. I found, for example, that some of the better qualities of Sparkling Water used more detail and modifiers than the lowest priced Champagne bottle, and that there was considerable difference between the highest and lowest priced Sparkling Water. It was therefore difficult to compare two types of beverage that contained significant variation within their two groups. A more successful analysis would possibly involve comparing the labels of top market Champagnes with high quality Sparkling Water, and lower priced Champagne with lower priced Sparkling Water, to achieve more accurate results.