

Product-Oriented Communication: A Linguistic Analysis of Selected Adverts¹

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Abstract

The language that is used in commercial advertisements in general often does more than just inform the public about products that are on sale; the language usually has an extra crucial task of trying to persuade potential customers to buy the products. The question that may be asked right at the outset is: How do designers of adverts make them persuasive? The main focus of this paper is to answer this and other related questions. From a linguistic point of view, it is evident that, among other things, designers of adverts pay attention to the morpho-syntactic, semantic and phonological aspects of the language used in an advert.

Introduction

The paper makes an attempt to show how words in selected adverts are carefully chosen and skilfully arranged so that they have persuasive effects on the potential buyers of the product. Persuasive adverts are intended to influence changes in attitudes, opinions, emotional states, and action towards the product that is being advertised (Bettinghaus 1968; Fielding 1997). In other words, product-oriented persuasive communication is aimed at manipulating people's minds so that they end up buying a product, sometimes without pausing to consider the rationale of taking such actions.

In this paper display printed adverts from newspapers, magazines and billboards were analysed, and not classified adverts since the latter seem to be mere notices, lacking the persuasive characteristics of the former. But why focus on the printed adverts and not those that appear in electronic media such as television and radio? The former are easier to study and reproduce on paper. Television adverts for example, present some constraints in their analysis as Vestergaard and Schroder (1986:10) note:

TV commercials extend in time and make use of the combined effect of sound and picture, it is only possible to give a very incomplete reproduction of them [on paper], whereas a printed advert can be reproduced as whole.

This problem can be generalised to radio adverts although pictures do not accompany them. However, it appears that the persuasive techniques that are used in the three types of adverts are more or less the same.

Advertising, Persuasion and Communication

Advertising is aimed at selling a product, an idea, a service or an attractive image. Advertising is basically a public notice that is "... designed to spread information with the view of promoting marketable goods and services" (Harris and Seldon 1962:40). In other words, advertising offers publicity for the sale of commercial goods and

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services. It can also be referred to as purchased space (in the print media) or time (in the electronic media) which is used to sell goods and services (Wilcox 1984).

In his analysis of the development of advertising, Norris (1990: 124) observes that:

...ingenuity, imagination and restless curiosity literary changed the face of advertising. It changed from something that was basically a notice or a wild unsupportable boast or simply an attention caller to a logical, carefully thought selling tool fully integrated with marketing strategy.

According to Winters et al. (1986:79), advertising is a "...method of influencing sales by sending a sponsored and paid message through mass media to a mass of potential buyers."

This definition concurs with Bredenkamp et al. (1991: 118) who view persuasive communication as:

... a process of communication in which a communicator succeeds in voluntarily forming, sustaining or changing the attitudes of a recipient or a group of recipients in accordance with what the communicator intends to achieve by his or her message (Only Study Guide for Communication, CMB –Q UNISA).

Adapting the two definitions for the purpose of this paper, it can be said that adverts comprise carefully designed messages that are aimed at eliciting specific behaviour changes in people. The influence that adverts have in causing people to buy certain products is very great. It appears that advertising has been more successful in changing people's opinions than any other form of persuasive communication (Albig 1962). Commenting on the power of adverts, Russel et al. (1986:417) assert that "advertising is the most single persuasive force in the world." This assertion however needs further research to find out to what extent political, ethical and other forms of propaganda can change people's opinions vis-à-vis advertising. To a great extent, it appears that designers of adverts capitalise on people's needs such as security, love, esteem, status and self recognition. They also analyse people's desires for pleasure, beauty, happiness, good health, power, sex and comfort, among others, before designing adverts.

Structure and meaning of selected Adverts

The general structure of adverts follows what Fielding (1997: 338) calls the AIDA approach, that is, adverts must attract the Attention of the reader, arouse the reader's Interest and Desire in the product, resulting in the reader's Action. Capturing people's attention and interest is perhaps the most difficult thing to do in designing an advert. Competition from other adverts, sometimes on the same page in a publication, presents a problem, which must always be borne in mind when designing an advert. So, designers of adverts usually use embellished language in order to convince customers to buy certain kinds of products.

In the heading look WHO CHOOSES BIG and GENTLE JADE in AD1 (The herald, 13 July 1999) we can identify alliteration on GENTLE JADE, a linguistic device that makes the phrase memorable. In pronouncing the two words we use the voiced alveopalatal affricate. Alliteration is also found in the text "We love it because it lasts

so long and it's really economical," words that are supposedly spoken by the mother in the illustration that accompanies the advert. This illustration communicates a non-verbal message which helps the text to be more convincing; the smiles on the faces of the members of the Makiwa family have an implicature of happiness arising from the use of Jade soap. The slogan of the advert, BIG ON QUALITY, GENTLE ON YOUR SKIN, is more appealing as it is a short memorable phrase that has been made possible by the use of disjunctive syntax, which cannot be read in formal texts. It would be cumbersome to have a slogan which reads JADE SOAP IS BIG ON QUALITY AND IT IS GENTLE ON YOUR SKIN as this would defeat the purpose of a slogan being short and catchy. It is not clear what the meaning of BIG ON QUALITY is, but the adjective BIG and the noun QUALITY are most likely going to influence customers into thinking that they are getting value for their money if they buy Jade soap.

Besides alliteration, adverts use rhyming words to make the message interesting and memorable. In AD 2 below, the copywriter uses the words "bite" and "right" to produce rhyme.

AD 2: STORK MARGARINE

Just one bite,

And you know you are right.

Adverts also strive on the use of comparatives and superlatives in order to communicate messages effectively. Comparatives are made possible by the use of the words "more" and "less" and the inflectional morpheme "-er". On the other hand, in order to form superlatives, the words "most" and the inflectional morpheme "-est" are used. Let us look at AD3 (Horizon, October 1998) in which comparatives have been underlined: "Sunbeam. The polish that gives you more shine and more time. SUNBEAM SHINES BRIGHTER, DRIES FASTER AND LASTS MUCH LONGER". The implication here is that Sunbeam" polish is better than any other floor polish. This impression is supported by the illustration (non-verbal communication) which shows two women (mother and daughter) leisurely talking in a room that has a sparkling floor, suggesting the good results of using sunbeam floor polish. In the body copy, the older woman says her daughter never used to have time with her because of the poor type of floor polish that the daughter used. "Now we have more time to get together", says the older woman because she has introduced her daughter to 'Sunbeam polish with Wondershine'. The use of compound words in this advert is effective as Sunbeam (Sun + beam) suggests a reflection of the sun from a well-polished surface; Wondershine (Wonder +shine) implies that the use of this brand of polish produces an extraordinary shining of the floor. Related to compounding is a linguistic technique called blending. This is when a word is formed from parts taken from other words, for example WINDOLENE (a name of a liquid used to clean windows) named from the words "window" and "cleaner". This technique is usually used to form brand names of products.

Still on comparatives, JIK (AD 4, Horizon, October 1998) is compared to no other bleach. Again, comparatives are underlined in the following text: NO BLEACH WHITENS AND REMOVES STAINS OR IS SAFER ON FABRICS THAN JIK. NO BLEACH IS BETTER THAN JIK THAT'S A PROMISE. Besides the comparative force of the above text, the message is strengthened by the illustration (non-verbal

communication) of a nun dressed in white and also by the white garment she is hanging on the line. The nun is used as a symbol of purity, implying, if one uses JIK, one's clothes are likely to be pure and as white as those of the nun in the picture.

In the BLACK OPAL cosmetic advert (AD 5, Parade, July 1999) we see a comparative that is used in a negative form: YOU NEVER LOOKED MORE BEAUTIFUL. This comparative has an illocutionary force of persuading the potential customers to buy the product with the belief that if they buy this product, one becomes more beautiful. Although it does not openly say that one must use Black Opal, the comparative used has a connotative meaning, which is left to the reader to work out.

Superlatives are a common feature in adverts. People are made to believe that if they use brand X of a product, they will always get the best results. The following show how the superlative inflectional morpheme “-est” is used: in AD 6, if one uses SUPER BLUE SURF, one gets the cleanest wash ever! HARVEST MARGARINE is purportedly made from the purest vegetable oil (AD 7, The Daily News, 21 April 1999). And when one buys a Mazda, one is definitely making the cleverest choice (AD 8, The Daily News, 19 May 1999). In the heading, ‘The most trusted name in colour cosmetics and skincare products’ in AD above, we are given the impression that BLACK OPAL is the only trusted cosmetic that one can use among a wide range of skincare products.

In general, the language that is used in skin care products is more emotive and powerful than more people, especially women, are made to believe that beauty is a result of the use of these products and not a natural quality or characteristic. For example in AD 9, it is claimed that Lanolene Milk ‘*gently pampers and conditions your skin, penetrating deeply to cleanse and moisturise, nourishing and revitalising it to a fragrant, sensual softness*’. The advert is appealing because of the careful use of adverbial phrases *gently pampers* and *penetrating deeply*, the adjectival phrase *fragrant, sensual softness* and the verbs *moisturise, cleanse, nourishing and revitalising*.

The following phrases in the AMBER VALLETTA deodorant (AD 10b, The Herald, 6 May 1999) are attractive in the sense that the underlying topic is love:

A FRAGRANCE SENSATION, A SPARKLING LOVE STORY, WONDERFULLY ROMANTIC.

What would be your interpretations of the following advert selling a piece of furniture?

“FOR SALE:

AN ANTIQUE DESK SUITABLE FOR LADY WITH GOOD LEGS AND LARGE DRAWERS” (AD 11, Fromkin and Rodman 1996: 110)

There are two possible meanings: the old, valuable desk has good legs and large drawers; The lady has good legs and large drawers (old-fashioned female underwear) The advert shows a case of structural ambiguity, “a term used in linguistics to refer to a construction with more than one grammatical interpretation in terms of constituent analysis” (Crystal 1991: 330). To produce humour which is intended to draw the attention and interest of readers, the designer of the advert uses this linguistic aspect. The advert puns on the words “legs” and “drawers”.

There is nothing unusual in the first meaning but eyebrows are raised when the “legs” and “drawers” refer to a woman’s. It is clear that this second meaning of the advert is in bad taste. Designers of adverts usually use puns to make adverts appealing as explained above.

Structural ambiguity can also be caused by the omission of a word or words in a structure. The linguistic term used when there is omission of word is called ellipsis. Advert designers sometimes use this linguistic technique, to make the advert attractive. Consider this heading of an Ortho-King bed advert:

NOBODY IS BETTER IN BED (AD 12, The Herald, 17 June 1999)

When I first came across this heading, I thought there was something wrong with it. I thought the copywriter wanted to say NOBODY’S BETTER BED! I refused to think that it meant what it literally implies that there is no one who is better than the other in bed, a meaning that may be interpreted as being in bad taste. The other meaning is that no one is better in bed manufacturing than Ortho-King, the maker of the spring bed that was being advertised. The designer of this advert intentionally omitted the lexical item MANUFACTURING at the end so that the heading could have a double meaning. The elliptical heading shows emphasis on the product being advertised and is more likely to capture the attention of potential customers. What is interesting with this advert is that all the people who were asked to interpret the heading were able to bring out only the literal meaning; they were unable to notice that this elliptical structure could mean something else.

The use of homonyms (homophones) shows how copywriters can be creative in advert designing. Homonyms are words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings. These words may or may not be spelt the same (Fromkin and Rodman 1996), for example “meet” and “meat”; and “bank” and “bank”. The way the Marvo stationery advert uses the homonym “secretary” in AD 13 (The Business Herald, 28 January 1999) is very interesting. A huge picture of a secretary bird is accompanied with the heading “About the only secretary we can’t satisfy”. The implication is that Marvo stationers can satisfy all needs of ordinary secretaries, that is human beings, but not the needs of a bird. The contrast between a human being and a bird in relation to the use of the stationery makes this advert interesting. The use of this semantic technique is further extended to the slogan of the same advert. It reads: MAKE THE WRITE IMPRESSION. Instead of using the word RIGHT, the designer used WRITE. Both words have the same pronunciation. The effect of using WRITE is that it emphasises to the reader that the product being advertised has something to do with WRITING. The word WRITE is used in the slogan as a reminder that the advert is about stationery. The same technique is used in an interesting way in another Marvo stationery advert below:

AD14: When we say stationery

We don’t mean stop!

Quality, range, service and quick delivery.

Move to the first class stationery

The advert is accompanied with a big stationary truck. In this advert, the copywriter

plays around with the same sound of homonyms “stationery” as for office use and “stationary” meaning “not moving”. The denotative versus the connotative meaning makes the advert interesting to read.

Advert designers may also use words in a way that might arouse nationalistic feelings in people. This may make people associate themselves with the product. Let us look at AD15 below, (The Herald, 22 July 1999):

AD15 “We feel sari for anyone who doesn’t take advantage of these value for money specials to see the real India.” (Air Mauritius)

The word “sari” which refers to part of the dress code of Indian women, is used instead of “sorry”. The designer breaks the rules of meaning and uses a word that does not have anything to do with being sorry. The designer also takes advantage of the fact that the words “sari” and “sorry” are nearly pronounced the same.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that rhetoric is the essence of advertising. Adverts aim at eliciting changes in people’s behaviour, habits, attitudes and tastes in relation to certain products. Designers of adverts make use of linguistic theory, that is, they use their knowledge of the phonetics, phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics and pragmatics of a language, including of course the non- verbal communication in the language. It has also been demonstrated that the use of some of the techniques discussed above results in adverts that are in bad taste. It is always advisable to treat adverts with a critical mind.

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