

The Discourse of Advertising: Linguistic Features and Classroom Activities

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Abstract:

The present paper is a descriptive study of the main linguistic features which are characteristic of advertising discourse. In the beginning, I attempt to delineate from a speech-act theoretic perspective what constitutes the genre of advertising as a specific communicative event, different from other types of discourse, while acknowledging the difficulties inherent in such an enterprise. I will then look at how language is effectively used in advertising and include some personal suggestions on how familiarity with this type of discourse can benefit our undergraduate and graduate students of linguistics, pragmatics and/or discourse analysis.

Keywords: advertising, genre fluidity, wordplay, deixis, implicature

1. The paradoxical nature of advertising

An interesting paradox to be noted in connection with advertising is that advertising is everywhere and nowhere. It is indeed everywhere because it is ubiquitous (in the street, in shops, newspapers, on TV or on the Internet, etc.) and yet, most people are reluctant to pay any attention to ads. As Cook (2001:1) rightly observed, “An ad is never the programme they are watching, never the letter they are waiting for, never the website they are seeking, nor the part of the newspaper they are reading.”

On the other hand, this paradox is only apparent because advertising does affect us, despite our pretending that this is not the case or that this is true only for other people. Goddard (2001:2) even detects an attitude of aloofness in many of us as we go on “dismissing advertising language as trite discourse written for the uneducated”.

2. What is advertising?

2.1. Defining and expanding the domain

In his *Encyclopedia of the English Language*, David Crystal warns that it is not easy to draw a clear conceptual

boundary around the many varieties of advertising. Dictionary definitions commonly refer to its function of promoting goods or services while discourse analysts acknowledge the need of a broader interpretation of advertising as an independent genre exhibiting some specific defining features and communicative purposes.

Indeed, advertising is used to do a lot more than just sell products such as toasters, TV sets, cars or toilet tissue. Ads can encourage us to vote for a candidate, agree with a political proposal, take a tour, give up a bad habit, or join the army. Some ads are designed to create favourable climates of opinion – for example, towards keeping the environment clean or accepting refugees in a country. A useful distinction then would be the one between **commercial** and **non-commercial advertising** or between **product** and **non-product ads**. But then how can we find a common denominator in terms of communicative function so as to fit Swale’s definition of a genre as “a class of communicative events which share a set of communicative purposes”? (1990:58)

My answer to this taxonomic challenge falls back on the advances in

speech-act theory, where standard illocutionary acts have been shown to defy exact definition or simply merge into each other. Thus in order to reconcile commercial advertising (for which the implicit or explicit performative verb is *buy*) with the non-commercial variety, we need to redefine this genre as a type of discourse persuading people to **DO** something. This essential directive component would accommodate all those cases referring to a change of attitude or adopting some new behaviour.

Again, however, the discourse analyst should be warned, as Cook (2001:12) points out, that advertising can be inspired by and thus have common borders with many other genres, such as political propaganda, conversation, poetry, fairy tales, cartoons, etc. Moreover, there are hybrid, deceptive cases when ingenious advertisers disguise their advertising intention as something else, e.g. a news program, mere advice-giving, etc.

2.2. Genre fluidity

In the light of the conceptual elusiveness mentioned above, it is also instructive to examine some cases of what I call **genre fluidity**: when one type of discourse can turn into something else if used in a particular way. Now in order to understand what I mean by “in a particular way”, we need to remember

that “the discourse analyst necessarily takes a pragmatic approach to the study of language in use” and that he “has to take account of the context in which a piece of discourse occurs” (Brown and Yule 1983:27). Moreover, context is not an amorphous, fuzzy notion but a well-structured concept which includes a set of features, e.g. place, time, possible world, indicated object, previous discourse, speaker/writer (sometimes different from source), target (at times, different from addressee), etc.

Here are some examples of genre fluidity, which is due to context sensitivity.

2.2.1. Indicated object, place, etc.

If I ask you to interpret the words “Also available in white” abstracted from the context in which they appeared, you will probably say that this looks and sounds like a piece of advertising, where several similar products of different colours were presented to a prospective buyer. However, if you read the very same words scratched in the dirt on a white car parked on a street near your house, your interpretation will surely be completely different.

2.2.2. Possible world, speaker (different from source)

When a close friend, who knows how much I enjoy eating sour cream on a piece of toast, tells me that he has discovered the perfect taste at his local

corner shop, his words can be taken as plain advice. A very different experience from when one of my neighbours in Romania (not a fictitious character!) insistently recommends a certain corner shop for a sour cream like no other, even after I tell him that my nutritionist has banned sour cream from my diet. Clearly in this case, if we are to analyse person deixis, the speaker (i.e. my neighbour) is different from the source (i.e. someone from the local corner shop).

2.2.3. Co-text, place

The octagon containing the word STOP in white letters on a red background is universally interpreted as a traffic sign notifying drivers that they must stop before proceeding. Compare this sign with another one, which can be frequently seen in my country along the roadside. The word “stop” is followed by the dative plural form of the Romanian noun *accident* which changes both the meaning of the message “Put an end to traffic accidents” and the type of discourse (an advertisement).



2.2.4. Co-text and creative exploitation of language within predictable linguistic patterns

Imagine now the traditional local corner shop, not your big supermarket of today, with a middle-aged shop assistant welcoming you with a warm smile and the following words:

We have high quality and low prices

Before proceeding any further, the reader is kindly invited to look away from this page and complete the missing part, preferably, with more than just one variant.

Some of the answers I usually get from students or workshop participants can be roughly summed up as follows:

We have high quality and low prices. You won't regret buying from us.

We have high quality and low prices. Come in and see for yourself.

We have high quality and low prices. You'll never want to shop elsewhere.

We have high quality and low prices. Because we respect our customers.

Different though they may seem, all these answers have something in common: they are based on a similar interpretation of the first part, namely of the conjunction *and*. Now here's a variant that you may not have thought of:

We have high quality and low prices. Which do you prefer?

Below is my suggested analysis:

The speaker puts the conjunction *and* to some inventive use by exploiting the difference between 'inclusive' and 'exclusive' meaning. In the latter sense (exclusive) the meaning becomes "either or".

But what does this piece of discourse count as in terms of our genre analysis? If we only read the first part ('we have high quality and low prices') we could say that it is a piece of spoken advertising - the shopkeeper wants to attract customers and what better way to do it than offering (or claiming to offer) just that: high quality and low prices. The second part, however, has a sobering effect: you can't have both; you'll have to make up your mind and choose.

How does the second part change the type of discourse? Well, this could still count as a piece of advertising, implying that high quality comes at a

price but without saying it explicitly. Here we have one of those widely talked about linguistic features of ads - the use of adjectives with positive implications (after all, he doesn't say "we have *expensive* products and *low quality* products").

Secondly, the shopkeeper may imply that we shouldn't take advertising discourse at face value because some words (*and* in this case) can be deceptive, in which case we have an instance of metadiscourse on our hands, which requires a different interpretation from the addressee.

To conclude our discussion on genre fluidity we will say that, in actual fact, the text analysed above is the caption accompanying a cartoon published in a 1984 issue of the famous *Punch* magazine.



"We have high quality and low prices. Which do you want?"

3- Using the language of advertising in the classroom

Owing to the wide range of linguistic features inherent in the advertising discourse, English language teachers can build up a relevant stock of teaching materials, either by drawing upon already existing activities or by finding inspiration in the inescapable multitude of examples surrounding us every day. In the following sections, I will present a selection of the materials I have used over the years in teaching various courses at MA level: phonetics, semantics, pragmatics, and creative writing (a specialist module for copywriters). My practical experience also includes writing advertisements for various business companies as well as for the Romanian Police.

3.1. Phonetics: pronunciation and spelling (deviant spelling in brand names)

The gap existing between Modern English pronunciation and spelling is a well-known fact and the subject of any introductory lecture as part of a course in phonetics. The following activity is based on Thomas (1991:91), requiring students to match the names of some British firms on the left (real names, it is claimed) with the types of business on the right.

(a) LITE BITE	photo-processing shop
(b) SHUSELLA	photo-copying firm
(c) KEEP-A-KREASE	children's clothes shop
(d) SUPASNAPS	snack bar
(e) KWICK KOPY	shoe-shop
(f) KWALITY FASHIONS	dry cleaners
(g) KUMFY KIDDY WEAR	taxi firm
(h) HANDICARS	garage and repair shop
(i) MR KLEEN	women's clothes shop
(j) SNAX	dry cleaners
(k) MOTOR KARE	hairdressers
(l) LOOKRITE	snack bar
(m) FLITE CENTRE	car-hire firm
(n) U-DRIVE	travel agency

While the matching task has the students focus more on meaning, an additional task of providing the normal spelling for the words in the left-hand column will be of more interest for the students of phonetics (but also for general English practice). My spelling highlights for now are such items as (a), (e), (g), (l) and (n), which illustrate a tendency towards orthographic simplification (phonetic spelling), with (e) coming fairly close to phonetic transcription. Some items appear to mimic common spelling mistakes (i in *lite* or ee in *kleen*), while for some careless language users (n) is an opportune reminder that despite what we read and write in our emails or instant

messages, the standard form of the pronoun is (still) *you*. Moreover, an item like (b) is a subtle echo of a fairytale character who owes the happy denouement to an incomplete pair of shoes (Cinderella) - more difficult to grasp by someone unfamiliar with Western folklore. Finally, my understanding of (g) involves an allusion to both *kumfû* or *kung fû* (a form of Chinese martial arts) and to Chinese English pronunciation (*kiddy*, instead of *kid*, which forms a closed syllable, virtually unpronounceable for a Chinese).

3.2. Semantics (polysemy, literal vs. figurative use): puns in ads

The following activity, which is suitable for seminars in semantics (but also for advanced English practice), is based again on Thomas (1991:92). The original instructions are: "Explain the following puns by giving the two possible meanings (often one meaning is literal and the other figurative)". However, my approach to this activity involves a more comprehensive task, namely rewriting the given sentences from 'advertising style' into 'plain English', in the hope of making my students aware of what is lost in the process. Moreover, I provide them with some examples of stylistic conversion from plain English back into 'advertese' again.

Below is a personal selection of my favourite items for classroom use:

- 1- WHEN YOU DECIDE TO GIVE HER A RING, GIVE US A RING (ADVERTISEMENT FOR A JEWELLER'S SHOP)
- 2- WHAT TO GIVE YOUR FAMILY FOR LUNCH? SAY 'CHEESE'! (Advertisement for cheese)
- 3- FOR A FEW POUNDS YOU CAN LOSE A FEW (Advertisement for a slimming course)
- 4- GO UP IN THE WORLD (Advertisement to recruit air stewards and stewardesses)
- 5- WE'LL GIVE YOU SOUND ADVICE (Hi-fi shop advertisement)
- 6- WE OFFER YOU A GOOD DEAL (Bank advertisement to attract new customers)
- 7- HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT BUYING OUR NEW BED? SLEEP ON IT (Advertisement for a new bed)
- 8- YOUR VIEWS ARE REFLECTED IN THE MIRROR (Advertisement for the Mirror newspaper)
- 9- MAKE A SNAP DECISION (Advertisement for a new camera)
- 10- MONEY MATTERS (Title of the financial section of a newspaper)
- 11- WE'LL GIVE YOU RED-CARPET TREATMENT (OR BLUE, OR GREEN, OR BROWN, OR YELLOW...) (Carpet shop)

advertisement)

- 12- SEA FOR YOURSELF (Advertisement to attract recruits to the Royal Navy)
- 13- TRY OUR GLUE ONCE AND YOU'LL ALWAYS STICK WITH US (Advertisement for a brand of glue)
- 14- THE WEATHER-MEN CAN'T GUARANTEE YOU AN INDIAN SUMMER, BUT WE CAN (Travel agency advertisement)
- 15- WE'LL GIVE YOU FOOD FOR THOUGHT (Restaurant advertisement)

For the present paper, my highlights and suggested answers include:

- (1) When you decide to marry her, call us.
- (2) For a little money you can lose some weight.
- (8) You will find your opinions expressed in *The Mirror*.
- (11) When you buy our carpets (available in red, blue, green, etc.), we'll make you feel like a king.
- (12) The sea can be all yours. Come to us and convince yourself.
- (13) Try our glue once and you will remain our faithful customer.
- (15) We'll give you food that you will never forget.

3.3. Pragmatics

Roughly speaking, pragmatics is concerned with how language is used in particular contexts, when speaker-meaning may be different from sentence-meaning. Paradoxically, pragmatics is best understood both in relation to and away from semantics, since it constitutes an academic discipline in its own right, where rigid rules are replaced by maxims and principles, which stem from basic rational considerations guiding our verbal and non-verbal social interactions. For the current purposes of the present paper, I will include some cases of advertisements which can be used in teaching deixis and implicature.

3.3.1. Deixis

The study of deixis as part of a course in pragmatics is concerned with the description and classification of all those deictic or referring expressions by means of which a language encodes or grammaticalizes the various features of the context of utterance (mentioned above under 2.2.). Deictic expressions can perform a deictic role (either gestural or symbolic) but they can also be used non-deictically (non-deictic usage of deictic expressions), when they are relativized to the text instead of to the situational context (e.g. anaphoric/ coreferential uses of personal pronouns, demonstratives, etc. but also non-anaphoric idiomatic uses, as in *I did this and that*).

A well-known example which can be found in many ads is *use it or lose it*. Originally, the two meanings of this expression are: 1. “Skills or knowledge that are seldom applied are likely to be lost with time.” (*Wiktionary*); 2. Property and privileges will be lost if they are not utilized by a certain date (for which I have combined the explanations given by *Wiktionary* and *Cambridge Dictionaries Online*). Although the two meanings are obviously different, they have nonetheless something in common: the coreferential use of the two deictic terms (i.e. both pronouns pick out the same referent).

Such an expression provides an opportunity which is too good to be left unexploited by advertisers. But something has to be changed so as to create an effect of novelty while the new linguistic creation still resonates with the reader as a reminder of the original expression.

e.g. Use it or lose it (Advertisement for an anti-theft device for cars), in which case the two deictic terms are no longer coreferential (the first *it* refers to the promoted product while the second *it* refers to your car)

For a second example, I will mention an advertisement which I wrote for the Romanian Police, as part of a collaborative project involving the English Department at the University of Timisoara, Romania. The aim of the advertisement was very clear: it had to

warn foreigners in my city against pickpockets, especially in such crowded places as shopping centres, post offices, train stations, etc. As we all know, an advertisement is more than just plain text (i.e. the copy, the legend or the slogan) since it usually includes some graphic design and possibly an audio-video component and it is certainly more meaningful when considered as a whole, rather than in parts (which is why all components must be carefully articulated). In this case, the graphic part consisted of a cropped photo illustrating a man’s pocket and a hand trying to reach for a partially visible wallet inside the pocket. The accompanying text read:

WATCH IT OR LOSE IT

In this case, I chose two different kinds of uses for the deictic terms: a non-deictic (idiomatic) use for the first *it* (*watch it* is a warning to someone to be careful) and a deictic gestural one for the second *it* (which can be interpreted only with reference to the visible indicated object, i.e. the wallet).

3.3.2. *Implicature*

According to Levinson (1983:97), “the notion of implicature [...] provides some explicit account of how it is possible to mean [...] more than what is actually said (i.e. more than what is literally expressed by the conventional sense of the linguistic expressions uttered)”. The main ideas about this

concept were advanced by Grice (1967) in what is known today as Grice's theory of implicature, which is centred around his four well-known maxims (of Quality, Quantity, Relevance and Manner) and the general cooperative principle, from which the maxims are derived. Put simply, participants in verbal interaction have to make their contribution sincerely (Quality), relevantly (Relevance) and clearly (Manner), while providing sufficient information. Implicatures are a special kind of pragmatic inference, a component or 'slice' of meaning which is calculated on the basis of how the speaker or writer relates to the maxims. If the maxims are observed, the interlocutor or the reader will have little difficulty in understanding the message, whereas if the maxims are flouted (i.e. infringed in an obvious way), the recipient of the message will have to go beyond the literal level of the utterance or text and look for the actual meaning elsewhere, depending on the specific context. This last case is possible because of the 'over-arching' role of the cooperative principle which prompts the listener (or reader) to go on crediting the speaker (or writer) with the best possible communicative intentions. It is, obviously, a more challenging task, involving some effort on the recipient's part in order to decode the message and there are many situations when communication can break down: *Do you mean it?* or *Are you serious?* are

metapragmatic illustrations of instances when the recipient of the message cannot go beyond full literality and continues to interpret everything at face value. The very cooperative principle is then at stake and one can end up by quitting the conversation or refusing to go on reading something.

Advertisements, especially in their stylized form of expression, are an inexhaustible supply of examples where Grice's maxims are flouted, and the most frequent flouts are related to Quality and Manner. As far as the first type is concerned, the ad is not being sincere to us and we know it, which makes the flout different from instances of maxim **violation** (a case of deceptive maxim non-observance). In other words, the insincerity becomes part of the communicative intention. This is why I define irony as a communicated lie (i.e. I'm lying to you and you know that I'm lying to you"). Understanding a flout of Quality will help the consumer put up with a flout of Manner (i.e. when the message appears to be opaque, obscure or ambiguous). Moreover, not only do we come to terms with the nature of advertising discourse but, as Grundy (2000:248) so aptly put it, "if we can pass the understanding test [...], we feel good about ourselves and, by association, we are motivated [...] to have positive feelings towards the products advertised. Passing the

understanding tests is a kind of initiation rite which makes us members of the privileged group of those who get the message.”

Below are some examples from Grundy (2000:77):

- 1- It's the taste (Coca Cola)
- 2- Ahead of current thinking (National Power)
- 3- In cordless technology we have the lead. (Black & Decker)
- 4- The best 4 x 4 x far (Land Rover)
- 5- You just can't help yourself. (written message accompanying a TV commercial for McCain pizzas in which the cook takes a piece of pizza for herself before serving her guests and then tries to make it look as though the pizza is still intact)
- 6- They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder. But no eyes are more critical than yours. (advertisement for an optician on suburban trains in Dublin)
- 7- Money doesn't grow on trees but it blossoms at our branches. (Lloyds Bank)

Briefly, (1) can be said to flout Quantity, since we are not told what the taste is or does, although we understand the taste to be good if we interpret this in an advertising context. In a different context, however, the same bit of text can have quite the opposite meaning, as when you tell someone why you have

stopped having lunch at the university's cafeteria. In all the other examples, Manner is flouted (“avoid ambiguity” and “avoid obscurity”) due to the double meaning of *current* (2), *lead* (3), *by*, made even more obscure when rendered as *x* (4), *can't help yourself*, where the modal is to be interpreted once as a stand-alone verb and then as part of an idiomatic construction (5), *critical* (6) and *branches* (7). This last example can also make a challenging subject in a translation exam at MA level, where the requirement should be for the students to comment on the difficulties that this type of discourse poses for the translator (in the Romanian language, for instance, a sign of social prosperity would be not for money to grow on trees but for stray dogs to roam the streets with knot-shaped pretzels around their tails).

3.4. Writing an advertisement

I conclude my presentation of suggested classroom activities related to advertising discourse with a short exercise which can be used in creative writing/copywriting practical classes or workshops.

Fill in the blanks to complete the following advertisements:

- a) *Seven days without our pizza makes*
.....
- b) *Time wounds all.....* (at a podiatrist's)
- c) *Drive carefully. We* (at an

- undertaker's).
- d) *No appointment necessary. We*
.. (Outside an exhaust muffler shop)
- e) *Smuckers - it's gotta be good.*
(an ice cream topping)

All students' answers should be considered and discussed. In the end, the students are presented with the original text (see below for the missing parts) and required to provide their evaluative comments.

(Answers: a) one weak; b) heels; c) can wait; d) hear you coming; e) with a name like that

Of particular interest could be (a), where *one* is unstressed as a pronoun but stressed as a numeral and (b), due to its subtle interplay with the more commonplace *Time heals all wounds*.

4. Conclusions

In order to account for all the possible manifestations of advertising discourse, including the non-commercial ones, workers in the fields of genre and discourse analysis will have to adopt a consistently comprehensive model for this domain, expanding the borders of its inherent directive component from **buying** something to **doing** something.

That advertising really works, one way or another affecting us all, is beyond doubt, considering that product manufacturers, politicians or social activists have never ceased to invest

ever-growing sums of money in it. Admittedly, as far as its quality is concerned, some advertisements can be better than others; some ads can be clever or subtle while others are annoying or downright silly. Just like with individual works of literature, the quality of individual advertisements is variable and so, we cannot dismiss the discourse of advertising in its entirety as minor or worthless.

Most importantly, perhaps, familiarity with the discourse of advertising can benefit our undergraduate and graduate students of linguistics, pragmatics and/or discourse analysis in various ways: enhancing their intrinsic knowledge of the respective fields and improving their critical-analytical skills, as well as their creativity.

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