Phonic and Graphic Elements in Advertising Discourse

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Abstract: Language is a great source of power for advertising linguistic creativity is at its ease, the words are very carefully chosen to create something unique, surprising and memorable in order to achieve a significant impact on the audience. Advertising uses different linguistic techniques at different levels to be persuasive: phonetic, lexical and morphological, semantic and pragmatic. However, when analyzing language in use in real situations, the boundaries between the levels of the language are blurry, but for the aims of this article we will focus on the sounds and allographs together with the pictures that accompany them.

Key words: advertising discourse, phonic elements, graphic elements, allographs, iconicity

1. Introduction

Advertising is one of the most controversial and most planned type of discourse, because it is relatively new and has clear intentions: to make people think in a certain way and to convince them to buy a certain product or service. Considering the competition, the producer wants to demonstrate the uniqueness of his product and tries to find new techniques to differentiate his product from the rest such as the construction of a powerful slogan and an artistic layout, the

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effective use of illustrations and an enthusiastic copy, that will attract the attention of millions of people and persuade them to purchase the product marketed.

This paper deals only with the English discourse and presents a few aspects of the advertising discourse processing. It aims to provide a bottom-up approach to advertising discourse, considering the construction of meaning in relation to sounds and allographs. For a better understanding of the concept ‘discourse of advertising’ we try to identify advertising as a discourse type.

2. Advertising as discourse

There are many types of discourse due to the fact that every profession has different ways of speaking and writing, different knowledge of the world etc.; thus, we can talk about the discourse of advertising, the discourse of tourism, medicine, politics, education, law, and others.

Among these, the discourse of advertising appears to be the most planned form of discourse. Analysts agree that the language of advertising is mostly persuasive and seductive meant to attract millions of people and to transform them into clients.

Today, advertising is everywhere; whether we read a newspaper, watch television, walk or shop we cannot not notice it. Although quasi - unknown in the former communist countries, advertising is always with us in the contemporary capitalist society: in mail deliveries, in the street, bus stations, etc. Because it is relatively new and associated with competitive market economy, advertising is one of the most controversial types of discourse. It is well known that the power of advertising is immense, as is the time, money and skill that go into it.

Advertising can be seen as the driving force behind our consumerism culture, making people consume more than they actually need, it creates artificial
desires that encourage unnecessary consumerism for the purpose of supporting a capitalist political system, but, on the other hand, there are lots of amusing and very well done adverts that make us think it is unfair to blame advertising for all the problems of the modern world.

However, today we can say that advertising has a history. Some of us have grown up and got used to it; that is why even if we think that it is not a good thing, we perceive it as inevitable. Apart from this, advertising has changed, meaning that it is much more subtle and entertaining, though subtlety means confusion, like, the advertisements that recommend a healthy diet to prevent a disease. Advertising reflects the cultural and social states and changes of the society, but it also creates new attitudes and needs.

Defining advertising may be a very difficult task. Several authors and famous advertisers have tried to give a clear definition of advertising and very often they have not come to a similar conclusion. Dictionaries usually focus on its function as public announcements designed to persuade people to buy a certain product or service. Although the main function of an advertisement is that of selling, there are adverts that just warn or lend support. Oxford Dictionary offers this definition of advertising: “the activity and industry of advertising things to people on television, in newspapers, etc.”, and “to advertise” means “to tell the public about a product in order to encourage people to buy or to use it” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary 2000: 19).

The word ‘advertisement’ had its roots in the Latin verb ‘advertere’, which means ‘to turn towards’. Although advertisements try to get out attention, they are much more than this; some say they are a powerful way of communication and some of the advertisements are so well-done, so attractive that we may consider them as a form of modern art.
The main function of advertising, which lies at the heart of advertising discourse, is the function of persuasion. Advertisements are there to convince us to think and more importantly to act in certain ways: to choose a particular destination for a holiday, to stay in a certain hotel, to use certain services and facilities, to buy a particular brand of drink, to overcome an unhealthy addiction. Thus, the discourse of advertising is filled with persuasive devices at all levels.

In Cook’s (1992) view discourse is language plus context, where text is any linguistic form separated from context and context includes music and pictures, substance, paralanguage, situation, co-text, inter-text, participants and function. As language does not exist out of context, it should always be studied in context. Participants perceive text and context together in a meaningful way.

Describing advertising as discourse is not an easy task considering the fact that any advert is the sum of many different elements and in order to study the discourse of advertising one should study all these elements mentioned: text plus context. Some studies approach only the language and do not mention the pictures, the sounds, the audience or the advertisers.

The same idea is also expressed by Matheson who differentiates between semioticians, who analyze the language, and discourse analysts, who “see the meanings of the ad less as a structure than as social acts of interpretation” (2005: 43). He also details the term of ‘inter-textual reference’, which is viewed along three dimensions: the pragmatic dimension with the relevance theory according to which the readers/ hearers search the most relevant meaning, the textual dimension, which is about inter-textual meanings that can be found in the text echoing of previous texts and the third dimension, a more distant reference (not a direct one). Thus, inter-text is the “accountable meaning along some or all of the three dimensions” (Matheson 2005: 48). Inter-textuality is really important in analyzing
advertisements as these are highly condensed and more often suggestive rather than explicit.

Another important issue in defining advertisements is type of advert. The matter is not simple at all since there are different categorizations according to varied criteria. Cook (1992: 7-8) divides advertisements by the medium in which they occur (print, TV, radio, magazine, etc.), by the product or service (destinations, hotels, cars, food, etc.), by technique (hard sell – direct appeal and soft sell; then reason – give motives to buy and tickle – appeals to emotions, humor and mood; another characterization by technique refers to short and long copy and to the frequency of an advert: slow drip and sudden burst). Other important categorization is by consumers, social class, personality, etc.

Rowse and Fish (2005: 99-107) offer a different categorization of copies: reason-why copy (when advertisers try to convince people to buy via facts, selling points, drawings, diagrams, etc.), human-interest copy (advertisers appeal to emotions), sense-appeal copy (as the name suggests the advert appeals to one or more senses), story-form copy (present stories, abstract truths), conversational copy (reproduce conversation between two consumers), educational copy (increase public knowledge of a certain product), jingles and rhymes, testimonial copy (contains a testimony from a notorious person) and institutional copy (its purpose is to develop good will rather than to sell).

There are many discussions regarding the categorizations of advertisements considering the continuous changes in fashion, desires and aspirations and in consequence in advertisement uses of language, pictures, and music. For some consumers adverts that appeal to reason work better than those which appeal to emotions; certain products are designed for men, women, rich people, youth, and so on. That is why for advertisers the concept of audience is very important and a
great amount of research is done in demographics of populations to find out the best target group for a certain product.

3. Sounds and allographs in advertising discourse

3.1. The sounds

This section is about phonetics and phonology and more precisely about the way in which advertisers use specific sound patterns (like rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, etc.), similar to those in poetic texts. Although sounds are more related to spoken advertising (speaker’s voice/ accent), there are many linguistic jingles and slogans that use sound strategies to draw our attention and to make the product more appealing as well as to remember better the text and recall it at the right moment.

A linguistic device used by advertisers is the *onomatopoeia*, i.e. words that contain sounds similar to the noises they describe such as buzz or zing. An American advertisement for Gulches of Fun Inn and Resorts sounds like this: “Vrroomm … Vrroomm, Vrroomm … Vrroomm … We’re all geared up at Gulches!” The advert pictures children in karts and bumper boats, so the ‘vrroomm’ is the sound of the kart and boat engine. The phrasal verb “geared up” is rather ambiguous. On the one hand, it may refer to the fact that everyone is prepared to have fun there, but on the other hand the choice of the phrasal verb that comes from “gear” is not random. Gear can be the machinery of these vehicles or their speed. The slogan of this advert is “The Coolest Place for the Hottest Time!”, which is written in blue and yellow. “The Coolest Place for the” is written in blue on a yellow background and “Hottest Time!” is written in yellow on a red background. Thus, the two antonyms ‘coolest’ and ‘hottest’ enforced by the choice of colors and font suggest two antonymous situations: on the one hand, the heat of
summer also represented by the yellow color that symbolizes the sun and the red, for the extreme heat and on the other hand the fairly cold temperature of the water park, also enforced by the blue, the color of the water and the sky. “Coolest” may also signify that the park is the greatest of all.

*Rhyme* is an important sound-play device meant to create memorable messages. It is a pattern of identity of sound between words or verse-lines and advertisers use it particularly to create slogans like the following: “Seeing is believing” (Sony); “Hollywood in Deadwood” (Celebrity Hotel); “Mild to Wild” (Sylvan Rocks Climbing School).

Another linguistic device related to rhyme is the *assonance*, which is a vowel harmony created by the same vowel in successive stressed syllables. It is only a near-rhyme and it is not so obvious. Such an example is the advertisement for Marriott hotel “Join instantly and enjoy all this”, in which ‘join’ and ‘enjoy’ area false rhyme, but attracts our attention. Another example is “Timing is Everything” (Sony).

In advertising it is also common to repeat certain sounds in order to stick the product in our memory. The repetition of the same letter or consonant sound, usually at the beginning of words is called *alliteration*. An advertisement like “*WildWaterWest Waterpark/ Catch the wave!*” is more likely to stick to our minds because of the alliteration of sound /w/ in the sentence. The same thing goes for “Makers of *life’s little luxuries*” (LU Biscuits). Alliteration is widely used in advertising slogans. There are twenty consonant sounds in English, but those that are made by stopping the air-stream completely (p, b, m, n, t, d, k and g) are most used, because they stand out more than others. “*Don’t dream it. Drive it.*” (Jaguar)

Advertisers create their messages by playing with the sounds to catch our attention and make the messages more memorable. It is widely known that the sounds used in advertisements are distinct. It is demonstrated that even when we
are unable to distinguish the words and utterances used in television, we are able to tell “when programming shifts from regular features to commercial breaks: there is something uniquely characteristic about the overall sound of TV advertising” (Woods 2006: 16).

3.2. The allographs

When people see an advertisement they perceive the text and the images together, they do not separate the text from the images. The way in which a text is written is also a form of image-making. Goddard (1998) discusses the matter of graphology in advertising and distinguishes first between the handwriting and the typed print. She argues that handwriting is perceived as more human, more personal and individualistic although handwriting in advertising is also written on the computer. Yet, different handwritings and typed writings may have different connotations.

For example, an advert for a Native American Museum starts with “KEVIN COSTNER invites you to discover Tatanka STORY OF THE BISON” and then there is a picture with Kevin Costner in the museum and a quote “These Black Hills gave me the feeling I was part of history”. To promote the museum they appeal to a famous actor, which gives credibility to the advertisement. The actor’s words look like they are handwritten as if the actor himself wrote that in the advert. Also, the italicized handwriting suggests a mature person, someone you can trust.

Unlike the advertisement above, the promotional material for a petting farm, where children can pet and feed the animals and even play with them, has a playful, fun and childish writing, with upper and lower cases, non-linear, bent in all directions that perfectly suggest the childhood theme. The name of the farm “Old MacDonald’s Petting Farm” is itself taken from a well-known children’s song and
the advert is inserted with lyrics from this song. Another feature of this writing that makes us think of childhood is the fact that it is in cheerful colors with shadows. Images with children and animals together complete the whole picture of the advert.

We can categorize writing according to different sizes, fonts, styles, typefaces, colors, as well as by uppercase and lowercase. The advert for Discovery Centre from South Dakota contains handwriting and different types of typed writings in different colors, shapes and forms. Let us consider just one example: “Your ENTIRE family will enjoy our hands-on SCIENCE exhibits”. This sentence is a combination of upper cases with lowercases, bolded and italicized words. All the important words are bolded, but the crucial ones that define the Centre are also written with uppercases. The word ‘ENTIRE’ is highlighted by being bolded and written with uppercases because it expresses the idea that both adults and children of all ages are welcome to this Centre; then, the words ‘hands-on’ and ‘exhibits’ are also bolded as they represent important features of the educational centre. ‘SCIENCE’ is distinct from ‘ENTIRE’ and all the other words by being italicized since it comprises the central idea of the Centre, also suggested by its name ‘Discovery’. The advert is also accompanied by suggestive pictures with children and parents engaged in different activities.

Writing can be used to create diverse shapes by means of different layouts. Such an example is the advertisement for a water park where all the lines in the advert suggest waves including the name of the water park “WildWaterWest” and the two slogans “Catch the wave!” and “Escape to the tropics!”. The name of the water park is written in front of a burning sun with two shades of blue separated by a yellow line and white shadows; the letters are big on the left side and become smaller on the right side, suggesting thus a three-dimensional wave. This is what
Cook mentions as iconicity by words (1992: 61-62). The wave here is an essential symbol considering the fact that the water park has only wave pools.

The advertisement for Evans Plunge, an indoor water park and pool, expresses very well the iconicity by letter shape as we can found it in Cook (1992: 62). The ‘u’ in plunge is very elongated in order to symbolize the very name of the water park and at the same time the action of jumping into the pool and the enthusiasm for this action. Actually, one of their slogans is “Plunge into fun!””, which suggests both the activity of jumping and the name of the water park as well as the enjoyment and the pleasure that accompany the activity.

Cook (1992: 67-68) also discusses the mood evocation through the typeface, meaning the brand names that are connected with the typeface. LG electronics is a good example: in an oval the letter ‘L’ is written in the centre and the letter ‘G’ surrounds it and a small circle is placed on the left side of the ‘L’ thus the hole picture may symbolize a human head who winks.

Another example is the logo of the Rixos hotel: the ‘X’ has a crown on top of it and at the bottom the arms underline the other four letters. The crown is a symbol of richness, luxury, beauty and fame, features of the five - star hotels as this one. The name itself suggests the richness and the luxury. KOA camping resort also has an interesting logo. There is an ‘X’ with the bottom arms longer than those on top, under them a triangle and on top, a little circle, all this creating the image of a tent.

Some advertisements exploit the resemblance between a product and one or more syllables of another word, enabling the fusion between the two: “An absoLUtely delicious introduction to LU Biscuits” the name of the product is in the third syllable of the word ‘absolutely’. Graphology here and the image that accompany the text suggest sophistication and romanticism.
Writing is used both to create text and image. Cook (1992) argues that all the typographic features are also employed to create parallel meanings sometimes quite different from the linguistic ones and that this shows a certain lack of confidence in the text.

4. Concluding Remarks

The linguistic strategies employed in the discourse of advertising are diverse and multilayered and advertisers use them skillfully to build the message of the advertisements. The main purpose of advertising is to sell, that is why in written advertisements clearness, briefness, force and precision become critical aspects. The effectiveness of the entire advertisement frequently depends on how successfully the words are chosen. In order to make the advertisement more appealing, advertisers play on sounds to please our ears and use graphology as an image - making strategy.

References