Evaluation in E-Advertisements: Appraisal across Cultures

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Abstract: This study presents a small-scale comparison of e-advertisements in two different languages: English and Romanian. It analyses the similarities and differences between the texts and their appraisal choices in this particular genre. Findings are discussed from Hall’s cultural perspective on context dependency. The results, not totally consistent with the current theory on intercultural communication, suggest the influence of socio-political changes and globalisation on language and culture.

Keyword: advertising discourse, appraisal theory, culture, discourse analysis, internet.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I compare e-advertisements in two different languages: English and Romanian. The analysis focuses on the text of each advertisement, particularly, on the way evaluative language is realized at the linguistic level in advertising on the Internet. The framework used is Appraisal Theory, following Martin & White (2005) and White (2005). My aim is twofold: (1) describe, analyse and compare the similarities and differences that appear between the types of
appraisal chosen and their uses in this particular genre and (2) see whether these choices can be accounted for from the point of view of cultural difference.

1.1. Theoretical framework

The study of the language of evaluation provides information about the writer’s value judgements, feelings, attitudes and purposes. It can also reveal the way the writer interacts with the reader and directs his/her attention to something in order to achieve the intended aims. This negotiation of meaning is done by adopting a certain position or role, usually in accordance with the purpose of communication and the audience addressed. Therefore, evaluative language can show information about the type of people interacting, the values they have, the society they inhabit and/or the culture they share.

The language of evaluation can be studied by using the categories of appraisal, which is considered “a central part of the meaning of any text” (Thompson 2004: 75). The appraisal framework mainly explores, describes and explains “the way language is used to evaluate, to adopt stances, to construct textual personas and to manage interpersonal positions and relationships” (White 2005, Appraisal: An Overview 1 section, paragraph 1). It is divided into three subtypes: ATTITUDE – evaluates people, places and things, ENGAGEMENT – adjusts writers’ commitment to what they evaluate, and GRADUATION – up-scales or down-scales the feelings and opinions expressed (Martin & White 2005: 35).

1.2. Cultural framework

It seems that “the choice of appraisal reflects and reinforces the ideological values of the culture” (Thompson 2004: 76). Even if there are many dimensions that can show cultural differences, I have chosen Hall’s context dimension (1976, 1990, 2000) since it seemed more relevant for this study, as it focuses on the ways
meaning is created and interpreted. According to Hall (1990: 6), context is “the information that surrounds an event; it is inextricably bound up with the meaning of that event”. The elements that combine to produce a given meaning usually depend on culture. He proposes two types of culture: low context, which relies on elaborated code systems; direct and highly structured messages and on linearly organized and focalized information, and high context, which relies on restricted code systems; unstructured messages; non-linear information and on meaning retrieved from shared knowledge (Hall 1976, 1990, 2000). Nonetheless, deviations from the main cultural pattern can occur in certain contexts and situations, since cultures are “dynamic, continuously developing, and evolving” (Neuliep 2006: 45) and are influenced by different factors, which may be geographical, historical, religious, economic, social or political (Şerbănescu 2007: 155).

The cultures under discussion can be classified according to context-dependency as follows. The English or, rather, the Anglo-Saxon culture is considered a low context culture, whereas the Romanian culture is seen as a high context culture (Hall 1976; Neuliep 2006; Ţerbănescu 2007). The present study investigates whether the texts, the types of Appraisal chosen and their uses are consistent with these cultural classifications.

2. Data selection and methodology

This study is part of a larger research project. The corpus consists of four advertisements taken from Internet travel agencies offering honeymoon packages. They share the following similarities: field (honeymoon holidays), function (to persuade couples to buy the luxury advertised), mode (Internet written text with image) and format (they contain a picture and a text of around 160 words). The most obvious difference is that they belong to different languages, countries and cultures. These features were established as selection criteria for the corpus
analysed. The selection process used the Google search engine and took the results generated by the word *honeymoon*. The results were taken in order, and the first that fitted these criteria was selected. The same procedure was followed for each of the four languages/varieties studied (English, Peninsular Spanish, Costa Rican Spanish and Romanian). International travel agencies and translated advertisements were excluded. After collecting the corpus, different analyses were carried out on the text and image of the advertisements, focusing on transitivity, thematic progression, evaluative language and visual metafunctions.

In this paper, for reasons of space, I refer only to one type of analysis and two e-advertisements. I present an analysis of the appraisal resources found in the texts of the English and Romanian e-advertisements carried out following White’s model (2005). I focus on types and uses of ATTITUDE, ENGAGEMENT, DIALOGIC POSITION and GRADUATION.

3. Results of the analysis

The results of the linguistic analyses are presented in relation to Appraisal theory and to the cultural variable for each advertisement. This shows how language follows or deviates from the typical cultural pattern. Both texts are included in the Appendix.

3.1. The English advertisement

The English text contains all the appraisal types; the most frequent is GRADUATION, whereas ATTITUDE and ENGAGEMENT have a similar frequency.

GRADUATION is mainly represented by FORCE, which in its turn is expressed especially by intensification suggested by superlatives as ‘most’ or ‘best’ and repetition of key words such as ‘honeymoon’ or ‘special’. It helps the writer to subjectively intensify the interpersonal force by continuously repeating several key
words throughout the text. The writer mainly emphasizes the qualities of the things appraised and indicates different destinations. The use of GRADUATION implies an explicit verbal code, which is a feature of low context cultures (Hall 1976: 79). Also, the high number of intensifiers draws attention to specific information, a feature typical of low context cultures (Șerbănescu 2007: 142).

ATTITUDE, positively used, is both in scribed, as in ‘exotic locations’, and evoked, as in ‘dedicated honeymoons team’. This can mean that evaluations, or meanings, are both expressed, as in low context cultures or shared, as in high context cultures (Hall 1976: 79). The predominant type of ATTITUDE is APPRECIATION, which can be considered usual, since the text is an advertisement for a product. Both the agency’s offers and its members are evaluated by the writer in terms of social value (‘best hotels’), quality (‘perfect itinerary’) and impact (‘very special’). In general, the English advertisement mainly encodes evaluation of things. Therefore, it looks as if, in order to persuade, the writer appeals neither to feelings nor behaviours, but to tastes. These are usually related to practical things such as the honeymoon packages and hotels proposed by the agency. It seems that persuasion is based on the presentation and evaluation of practical information, a practice usually encountered in low context cultures (Neuliep 2006: 60).

Lastly, ENGAGEMENT is less used than ATTITUDE and it is mainly expressed through modality. Its forms are varied and employed in equal amounts, ranging from possibility ‘could’, probability ‘perhaps’ to certainty ‘could not’, modalized causality ‘if’ and ability ‘able to’. This variety provides the basis for meaning negotiation, which is a feature of high context cultures (Șerbănescu 2007: 141). The textual voice combines a range of resources to present, adjust and negotiate information. The English text is constructed more by monoglossic sentences (‘please see the Experiences section on our website for inspiration’) than
heteroglossic ones (‘if you are looking to combine two destinations within your honeymoon’), in which information is stated rather than negotiated, typical of *low context cultures* (Șerbănescu 2007: 142). The focus on information leads to the construction of a denotative discourse, which is typical of *low context cultures* (ibid: 142).

To sum up, the appraisal system in the English advertisement focuses mainly on the evaluation of things and practical information. Negotiation is secondary to information. Considering this, the advertisement aims at persuading the reader principally by means of presenting information, as in *low context cultures* (Hall 1976: 79).

### 3.2. The Romanian advertisement

The writer of the Romanian advertisement also makes use of all the appraisal systems. **GRADUATION** is again the main type, with **ATTITUDE** and **ENGAGEMENT** almost equally represented.

The predominant use of **GRADUATION** indicates an elaborated code system based on an explicit verbal code as typical of *low context cultures* (Hall 1976: 79). It is mainly expressed through intensifiers (R. *atâtea* E. ‘so many’), low **FORCE** (R. *să alegi* E. ‘choose’) and sharp **FOCUS** (R. *nu oricare* E. ‘not any’). **GRADUATION** is employed to scale the writer and reader’s feelings and the types of holiday, pointing out the main participants of the advertisement. The focalization of feelings is a feature encountered in *high context cultures* (Șerbănescu 2007: 141).

The linguistic resources of the **ENGAGEMENT** system are varied, ranging from modal verbs (R. *vor* E. ‘will’) and constructions (R. *totul este posibil* E. ‘everything is possible’), which are the most used ones, to evidentials (R. *par* E. ‘seem’), conjuncts (R. *ci* E. ‘but’) and projections (R. *Da* E. ‘Yes’). It is principally used to depict possible pictures of the reader’s past and future. The writer seems to
be more concerned with the creation of the antithesis between past and future than with the description of the product advertised. Since the product depends more on the context created than on the verbal code expressed, the advertisement can be considered to belong to high context cultures (Şerbănescu 2007: 141). The Romanian text is mainly built by heteroglossic sentences (R. chiar că meritați o vacanță E. ‘you really deserve a holiday’), the textual voice seems, thus, to negotiate more than inform, as typical of high context cultures (Hall 1976: 79). Furthermore, negotiation implies connotative discourse and shared knowledge, features characteristic of high context cultures (Şerbănescu 2007: 141).

Finally, attitude is less used than engagement; the writer seems to be more concerned with the negotiation of meaning than with evaluation. Its system is mainly built by positive (R. efecte benefice E. ‘healthy effects’) and evoked (R. o insulă îndepărâtă din Pacific E. ‘a far-away island in the Pacific’) instances. The writer does not need to overtly express opinions in order to appraise. Thus, it seems that s/he shares with the reader a set of common emotions, beliefs and values that can be communicated through reference to content and context, as typical in high context cultures (Şerbănescu 2007: 141). The predominant subtype is appreciation, as typical for advertisements. The writer employs it to evaluate past events, such as the wedding ceremony (inspirată ‘inspired’), and to characterise possible destinations (R. renumitele cluburi E. ‘well-known clubs’), paying more attention to values and qualities than to the impact on the reader. In addition, affect resources are also widely used in the Romanian advertisement. They refer to the reader’s past and future possible feelings and states (R. atată stres E. ‘so much stress’, R. energia E. ‘energy’) and to the agency’s present wishes (R. No Surprises te ajută să alegi E. ‘No Surprises helps you choose’). The writer seems to evaluate the qualities, values and feelings of the appraised in order to sell the
product. Such emphasis on feelings and emotions is usually encountered in *high context cultures*.

All in all, the appraisal systems of the Romanian advertisement point out and characterize the main participants of the message. Persuasion and thus, the selling of the ‘product’, are meant to be achieved not by presenting information, but by negotiating several antitheses (past - future, stress – relax) as in *high context cultures* (Hall 1976: 79).

### 3.3. Summary of findings

Relating the findings to the literature consulted (Hall 1976, 1990, 2000; Neuliep 2006; Şerbânescu 2007), the appraisal resources used in the English advertisement indicate contextual features mainly encountered in *low context cultures*, such as elaborated code systems, direct and explicit message, focalised information, decisions based on facts and denotative discourse. In the case of the Romanian advertisement, its resources show contextual features mainly typical of *high context cultures*, such as restricted code systems, meaning negotiation, shared experiences and knowledge, emphasis on feelings, decisions based on intuition and connotative discourse. At the same time, both texts contain some contextual features more characteristic of the other type of culture, thus deviating. The English advertisement is also build around shared experience and meaning negotiation, whereas the Romanian one contains features of elaborated code systems.

### 4. Conclusion

To conclude, in this paper I have compared the texts of two e-advertisements in different languages: English and Romanian. I have analysed the types of appraisal chosen and their uses in these genre texts following Martin &
White (2005) and White (2005). I have then discussed the findings from the cultural perspective of context dependency proposed by Hall (1976).

The advertisements are mainly consistent with the theory consulted. The English advertisement seems typical of low context cultures, whereas the Romanian advertisement seems to belong to high context cultures.

The inconsistencies found can perhaps be explained by the influence of the context of communication (advertising), which is considered high, and/or the medium of communication, (Internet), which is considered low. They may also be indicative of different cultural changes. English culture can be influenced by the internationalisation of the English language, whereas, Romanian culture might be influenced by the changes in terms of politics, economy, society and culture and/or by globalisation and English culture.

Notes

1. In the Appendix, there are two tables presenting the summary of findings: Table 1 – Summary of appraisal findings and Table 2 - Summary of features.

References

Appendix

English advertisement:

‘With some of the most exotic locations in the world and a selection of the finest hotels in the world booking your dream honeymoon with us could not be more simple. Members of a dedicated honeymoons and weddings team, with first-hand experience of the resorts, are able to recommend the best hotels to suit your requirements. Many of the resorts also have fantastic honeymoon packages and offers – making the very special even more special – so call one of the team now on 0161 233 0110. To see the very latest and best honeymoon offers, please click here.> If you are looking to combine two destinations within your honeymoon - be it an African Safari with an Indian Ocean Island, a journey around the Far East, or perhaps a Caribbean island with an American city - we can tailor make your perfect itinerary. Please see the Experiences section on our website for inspiration. More Details...>

Romanian advertisement:

‘Spune Da paradisului! După atâta oboseală, stres, după atâtea întrebări care par fără sfârșit: care să fie culoarea rochiei, alb sau ivory?..., locația ar arăta bine decorată cu alb și auriu sau ar merge ceva orange să mai învioreze puțin spiritul? trandafiri sau orhidee?...unde îi pun pe prietii nașilor?...e inspirată alegerea tortului din frișcă în luna iulie?... atâtea griji, care vor dispărea într-o zi ca un nor vaporos fără nici măcar să vă dați seama foarte bine ce s-a întâmplat! Chiar că meritați o vacanță! Și nu oricare, ci o lună de miere! Prima oprire pe acest drum pe care ați pășit împreună! No Surprises te ajută să alegi de la efectele benefice ale masajului thailandez și ale cremelor din plante exotice, de la atingerea nisipului fin și energia băilor de soare, până la atingerea corpurilor electrificate de muzică în renunțatele cluburile de noapte din Ibiza. România sau o insulă îndepărtată din Pacific, totul este posibil! Tu decizi!’

(“Say Yes to paradise! After so much fatigue, stress, after so many questions which seem endless: which should be the colour of the dress, white or ivory?..., the location would look nice decorated in white and gold or would something orange be better in order to refresh a little the spirit? roses or orchids?...where do I place the godfathers’ friends?...is it the choice of a cream cake in the month of July inspired?...so many worries, which will disappear in one day, like a wispy cloud without even realizing very well what has happened! You really deserve a holiday! And not any holiday, but a honeymoon! The first stop on this road you have set out on together! No Surprises helps you choose from the healthy effects of the Thai massage and of the creams from exotic plants, from the touch of the fine sand and the energy of the sunbaths, to the touch of bodies electrified by music in Ibiza’s well-known night clubs. Romania or a far-away island in the Pacific, everything is possible! You decide!”)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>ROMANIAN AD</th>
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Table 1 – Summary of Appraisal findings

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Table 2 – Summary of features