LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF ADVERTISEMENTS

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Abstract

This paper aims to show how advertisements in English newspapers and magazines portray the cultural values and identity of the people by exploiting certain linguistic features of English. The first section of the paper will give an overview of advertising and discuss the structure of adverts in the print media. The second section of the paper will analyse the linguistic features of advertising texts after reviewing some key studies on the language of advertisements. This section will also examine the visual elements of advertisements, which add appeal and represent the cultural values of the readers. The final section will highlight how the discourse of commercial advertisements construct identities by representing certain products, personalities, and groups of people while neglecting the other segments of the society.

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Introduction

Advertising comes from the Latin word "advertere", meaning, "turn towards." (Goddard, 1998: 10) Advertising was started in ancient Greece and Rome when criers and signs were used to carry information for advertising goods and services. This practice was continued even during the middle ages. During the 17th century, when newspapers were published in various parts of the world, newspaper advertising began. The field of advertising has been revolutionized after the arrival of satellite television, Internet, and e-commerce.

Advertising in the print media is the oldest and the largest in terms of advertising billing. Advertising in magazines has its own advantages. Magazine subscribers can keep the particular issue and read it several times. Also most of the magazines use good quality paper and colour print to draw readers' attention.

Harris and Seldon (1962: 40) define advertising as a public notice 'designed to spread information with a view to promoting the sales of
marketable goods and services. Advertisements appear in newspapers, magazines, radio, television, cinema film, outdoor hoardings, posters, direct mail etc... The sole purpose of advertising is to sell a product, a service, or an idea through effective communication.

According to Goddard (1998: 10), advertising is not just about the commercial promotion of branded products, but can also encompass the idea of texts whose intention is to enhance the image of an individual, group or organization.

Advertisements reflect the language, beliefs, values, and the structure of the society. There are many reasons for advertising, for example, to launch a new product or service, to expand the market to other areas, to revise price, to challenge competition, to hire personnel or even to find a spouse. The jewelry advert on the left incorporates auspicious elements of South Indian culture like betel leaves, two gold ear studs (shaped like betel nuts) turmeric and vermilion to capture customers' cultural beliefs.

Goddard (1998: 10) claims that advertising texts [advertisements] are seen as potentially involving complex notions of audience, where readers have to work hard to decode messages and understand different relationships [and cultural values]. In the process of creating advertisements for all these reasons, language is of crucial importance.

Advertisements carry objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts, which are called symbols. A symbol, in its basic sense, is a conventional representation of a concept, quality, etc. The symbol of a globe in the ‘Continental Airlines’ advert shows the global networks of the carrier. It will be helpful to look at the structure of advertising texts before moving on to study the language features.

Structure of advertisements

Advertisements in newspapers and magazines usually consist of a headline, a body (copy), a caption, a slogan, and a tagline. Headline is the most important element of a print ad because headlines attract readers' attention. The body is the text of the ad - the paragraphs in smaller typeface. The body provides support, evidence and explanation and it is supposed to attract consumer
interest with visual and verbal elements. The following types of headlines are common in the advertisements of newspapers and magazines.

**Command headlines:** Command headlines generate commands by using the imperative form of the verb like 'scoot and skate' in the text here. Commands attract readers' attention because someone is demanding readers' attention.

**Interrogative headlines:** Questions also attract readers' attention because they invite participation like the headline in this advert: *Why should your skin pay for your lifestyle?*

**How** and **Why** headlines: Adding "how" or "why" to a headline increases the appeal of the ad and bonds it to the visual. For example, the ad: *How to increase your X appeal in this ad.*

**Flagged headlines:** Headlines flag down the target audience. For example, an ad meant for 'senior citizens' can address the audience directly in the headline. As shown in this example: *Dear Senior Citizens, to book your share of happiness...*

**Product-specific headlines:** Some headlines include the name or a part of the product's name being advertised. As in the adverts below with the product names in the headline.
It is worth pointing out that copywriters use a number of linguistic devices in advertisements in the headlines and the texts. For instance, copywriters in India include features of Indian English (code mixing, code switching and borrowing) apart from other linguistic and stylistic devices to attract customers' interest. It will be helpful to look at some studies on the language of advertising before analysing the language features of ads.

**Language of Advertisements**

Leech (1966); Geis (1982); Vestergaard and Schroeder (1985); and Goddard (1998) have studied the linguistic aspects of advertisements. Leech (1966) in his study has analyzed the grammar, vocabulary, discourse, rhyme, and rhetoric of (television) commercials. He has related these aspects with the functional factors such as attention value, listenability/readability, memorability and selling power.

Phonological aspects such as alliteration, rhythm, rhyme, and jingle are related to memorability. Frequent use of imperatives and superlatives are connected with selling power. The language of advertising has been identified with the use of clauses, phrases, and words as minor sentences.

Geis (1982) focuses on certain recurrent linguistic devices in advertisements. He concludes that the language of advertisements is vague and subjective rather than explicit and objective.

Vestergaard and Schroder (1985) have studied the language of advertisements in the press in terms of the communicative functions of language such as expressive, directive, informational, metalingual, interactional, contextual, and poetic. The different textual aspects such as coherence and cohesion, topicalization, presupposition and entailment, and
participant roles have been studied. They have also identified the importance of imperatives and directive speech acts in encouraging the audience to buy the products.

Goddard's (1998) study examines the discourse features of advertisements in newspapers and magazines such as, polysemy, intertextuality, metaphor, slogan, slogo, connotation, and phonological features. This paper will use Goddard's (1998) framework to study English advertisements in the print media. The discourse features will be examined in this section.

**Polysemy:** A process by which certain words have several meanings. For example, the word 'back' in the ad refers to the word 'back' as in return or come back. However, the visual in the soap advert shows the model's 'back' for the product which relates to the product.

**Intertextuality:** The way in which a text refers to another text in slogans, headlines or the visual aspects in layout and images. For example, 'Starry Nights' in the ad has a direct reference to the novel *Starry Nights* by the Indian English writer Shoba Dé. Most of the readers are likely to understand the reference because the advertisement below is from the Indian version of the *Reader’s Digest*.

Although the line 'All things bright and beautiful' appears in a commercial context, it refers to the popular Christian poem, which is still taught in many Indian schools. 'Jack fell down...' in the advertisement of Lawton medical insurance is an obvious reference to the nursery rhyme 'Jack and Jill...';
Metaphor: Goddard (1998: 124) defines metaphor as a word or a phrase, which establishes a comparison or analogy between one object or idea and another. Goddard (1998) cites the example of BeanZ MeanZ HeinZ or HeinZ MeanZ BeanZ. This ad does not use a comparison, but asserts that Heinz (baked beans) is beans or vice versa. It is worth pointing out that this ad plays with the sibilants /s/ and /z/ sounds as well. The sound elements in ads will be taken up later in this paper.

Slogan: A phrase designed to be memorable, attaching to a product or service during a particular ad campaign. ‘Signature of the connoisseur’ in this advert with the famous Hindi film actor Amitabh Bachan is an example of a slogan.

On the other hand, a slogan is used by a company in all its ads - regardless of any campaign ‘HSBC the world's local bank’ is usually attached to the ads of Hong Kong Bank or the ‘Citi never sleeps’ for Citi Bank and ‘Utterly butterly delicious’ for an Indian brand of butter shown here.
**Phonological aspects:** As mentioned earlier in the advert of Heinz, copywriters play with the sound system of the language. Phoneme substitution (deliberate replacement of an expected sound by an unexpected sound is shown in the advert here. 'Kidz (kids) and 'X'clusive' (exclusive) are spelt differently.

**Denotation and Connotation:** According to Goddard (1998: 123), denotation is the literal, dictionary meaning of a word, its barest factual meaning. The connotations of a word are the associations it creates. Although the words 'switch' and 'current' in the tooth brush ad refers to 'change' (as in switch) and 'present' (as in current), the words also refer to electricity and electronics because the tooth brush is electronic – runs on battery.

**Code switching, code mixing and borrowing:** Code switching and code mixing are used differently by different people. For some people, the latter (code mixing) can only occur within a sentence, and the former (code switching) is the more general term and code switching can include borrowing. The Hindi words 'beta' (son) or Mera (my), baalon (hair) etc in the examples of code switching in English advertisements in the Indian context.
The verbal and the visual elements create impact in advertisements. These elements complement each other and have an aesthetic purpose and a functional purpose. Some key visual elements like importance, position, layout, economy, coherence, and consistency will be analysed in this section.

**Visual importance:** The layout should distinguish what is important, less important and least important. Usually, the most important part is highlighted in the layout. For example, the most important words in the text of the following advert use a larger font and they move from left to right. The models on the extremes are clearer than the model in the centre. The visual in the middle of the text gives a full view of the product – the dress in this context.

**Visual positions:** The most important items appear in areas, which are likely to attract readers' attention. It is worth noting that people normally read from top to bottom or left to right. This advert is useful to highlight the importance of what is known as visual positions in adverts.

**Symmetrical layout:** A symmetrical layout suggests stability. The layout moves from left to right and everything is centred. The advert with the life-size stickers of people on automatic sliding doors of departmental stores moves from the centre to the left and right. It feels like the people
on the door are moving away. The person enters to find the picture message of the product.

The above BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation advert has a symmetrical layout too.

**Asymmetrical layout**, in which two sides are not the same size or shape, suggests contrast rather than harmony. Contrast and variety are visually more attractive when compared to evenly repeated and evenly spaced visuals. The last visual on the previous page highlight the attractiveness of asymmetrical layout.

**Economy**: The fewer the elements, the stronger the impact. Overloaded layouts are generally less effective in ads. The advertisement on the left by a funeral services company at a subway in Berlin does not include too many elements, except the words, 'Come a little closer'.

Also coherence and consistency are important aspects of layout - the appearance should match the message.
The following advert represents the idea of 'curves' in graphological (through writing) and physical terms – the woman in the visual. The verbal and visual elements in this advert are aesthetically consistent.

The advert for the jeans is shaped like denim cloth and the colour scheme represents bleached jeans trousers.

Consistency also means using one typeface rather than several for creating coherence through colours, shapes, and fonts. The advert is printed in a single typeface also black, white and grey are the primary colours in the text. However, the product is multi-coloured.

Adverts not only includelinguistic metaphors, but visual metaphors too. Visual metaphorsconvey additional or more complex meaning beyond the literal meaning, often in a subtle way; they can be a way of 'expressing
the inexpressible. The metaphor in the advert is clear. Driving a Rover is ‘like’ having a lion as a pet. The playful juxtaposition works well.

Conclusion

The selling power is linked with the language in general. The use of compounds, layers of natural, and nativized vocabulary and phonological devices are some of the aspects related to the language of adverts. Attention value is achieved by minor sentences, writing style idioms, intertextual references, figurative language, and rhyme. The frequent use of imperatives, jingles and alliteration make the advert memorable. Although the language of advertising is tailored to suit space limitations, copywriters tend to preserve the beauty of the language.

Copywriters like literary writers and artists use language and pictures to communicate to the target audience. Generally, creative texts aim to entertain however; ads have a business agenda as well. It is necessary to be aware of how advertisements influence our perception and personal feelings through the creative interplay of words and pictures. As readers we must be critical of advertisements and raise these pertinent questions: What is being communicated here? Am I being entertained, informed, or persuaded? What alternative images are present in my mind?

Frequent images in adverts include fashion models and people who can afford high-tech facilities. The Sony play station and Duracell adverts below illustrate this claim.

Advertisements also project certain types of personalities over others. For example, the visual on the left side below represents the recurrent image of being ‘cool’.
Lastly, adverts rarely include poor people's dreams, hopes, achievements, ethnic groups, African, and South Asian scientists. Although adverts are colourful and use creative language, they do not depict reality. It is important to realize whether reading adverts change our worldview or to what extent they influence our lives, values, and behaviour.

References:


