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A Semantic Analysis of the Language of Advertising

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Abstract

Semantics is the study of meaning system of a language and its approaches vary widely. In one view, meaning is the relationship between language and the external world (referential or denotative meaning), between a word and the concept it stands for. In another, it involves the mental state of the speaker, as reflected in a range of personal, emotive overtones (affective or connotative meaning). The uniqueness of the choice of words makes the language of advertising a specialized field of study. This paper presents an analytical study of the language features of English advertisements at a semantic level. In order to conduct a data-driven study, the writer has built a corpus of over 20 English advertisements. Through the detailed survey of all the advertisements, the semantic features of the language of advertising are summarized and possible conclusions are given in the light of effectiveness of advertising. After a brief introduction to semantics and advertising language, the paper is focused on the linguistic realizations in English advertising from the semantic perspective. In the analysis, the use of connotative meaning of words, adjectives, coined words, mis-pelt words, repetition, metaphoric use of words, punning, non-existing words, the use of ambiguous statements are discussed to reveal fuzzy nature that are used by advertisers to achieve their persuasive ends. It goes further to treat the semiotic analysis of the language of advertising. The paper is then concluded with a brief summary. It is hoped

that the paper can shed light on the semantic features of language of advertisements and also provide help to copywriters and English learners.

Introduction

Advertising may be described as the science of arresting the human intelligence long enough to get money from it. It is thus clear that advertising has played a decisive role in today's business world. The issue of whether advertising languages are attractive and persuasive or not has become the point of attention. So thorough studies on language features of English advertising helps improve both the understanding and designing of successful advertisements. Semantics, on the other hand, is the study of meaning system of a language and its approaches vary widely. In one view, meaning is the relationship between language and the external world (referential or denotative meaning), between a word and the concept it stands for. In another, it involves the mental state of the speaker, as reflected in a range of personal, emotive overtones (affective or connotative meaning). Semantic is one of the linguistic forms that propel advertising to the desired height. The uniqueness of the word choice and association makes the language of advertising a specialized field of study. A close examination is made of the various word manipulations and arrangements, the choice of words, word order, denotative and connotative meanings of advertisement slots, and other deviations foregrounded on established English language code. The idea is to find out how writers create awareness and to provide fuller understanding and appreciation of the texture, meaning and comprehension of the language employed. In advertisement, the choice of diction involves exceptional skills. This will surely help in finding the right words combination for a given situation. Wrong lexical choices will either inaccurately mar the purpose of communication or at best vaguely or partially convey the intended meaning. The most important factor in communication is the attainment of a point of understanding of the meaning. Wolf and Aurner maintained that 'effective communicators, including prominent historians, have continued efforts to explore and to develop the accuracy, clarity and coherence of messages' (qtd in *Journal of Language and Literature*, A.I.C.E 1996:40). They listed three techniques of effective communicators as unity, coherence, and emphasis. Effective training in communication must be based on a solid educated foundation in English usage: vocabulary, punctuations, figures, and in writing craftsmanship (Stewart & others 1968). They are saying that to write messages that are clear and fluid, one must observe certain techniques and without the techniques, they warned that one's writing may block or confuse

the reader and distract his attention from the central purpose. This is applicable to advertisers when they manipulate their language to suit their aims which are to inform, communicate and persuade. The paper will analyze some advertisement slogans and make general conclusions about the semantic features of the language of advertising.

Words and Meanings in Advertising

Precision and effectiveness in advertising depend on the careful use of words. Words are used to convey meaning exactly and vividly to the audience. It is necessary here to examine the language of advertising in terms of word meaning. Basically, meanings are of two kinds-denotative and connotative meaning. Denotative meaning is the literal or common dictionary meaning while connotative is the evaluative, inferred or emotional meaning. The denotations will be roughly the same for people who use the same dictionary but words have different connotations for different people. Here, meanings are influenced by the context in which they are used, by the relationship between the sender and the receiver and by many other variables. Therefore, the denotation of a word is the explicit literal meaning while the connotation is the meaning with which it is associated. Advertisements that express meaning use word with wide extensions. The words often connote strength, reliability, perfection, notability, and other such qualities.

One can say that the language of advertising is connotative. Let us consider the bournvita advertisement and its nourishing connotations. It seeks to appeal to an audience which is expected to see the rich and delicious content of the beverage.

Bournvita is the delicious
refreshing, vitality giving food drink
ideal for the whole family. Bournvita
hot or cold, can be drunk any time of the day.

Notice such words as delicious, refreshing, and vitality. The advertiser wants the audience to bear in mind that bournvita is nutritious and could be taken any time of the day whether the weather is hot or cold. It is also for the young and the old, hence the invitation 'ideal for the whole family'. The adjectives depict bournvita as a total vitality drink that contains all the important nutritional values: proteins, vitamins, minerals, and carbohydrates. Because of this, it should be used by everybody. Also in the Guinness advertisement, '... Enjoy a Guinness. Good rich dark, satisfying....' The words 'rich' and 'dark' have an emotional connotation because they are unusual

adjectives to a drink. Many words used in copies are endowed with strong emotional connotations. They not only provide us with information, they tell us a lot about the feelings of user. A word like 'home' seems to be inherently emotive and in captions carries a high emotive overtone. The emotive overtone of words is always pleasant. This is because advertising seeks to influence the audience and, as such, words of pleasant connotations must be used. They are used in also this advertisement for the Home-Pride hotel: 'The best hotel ever, home for all'. The word 'home' raises emotion in the minds of the listeners. It connotes comfortability. By using 'home', an impression of a family-setting for relaxation is created. In this caption 'Joy...your special own beauty soap' the emotive factor is derived by the use of emphatic determiner 'own' and the adjective 'special'. The Joy soap is not only 'your own' but special. Apart from the connotative and denotative meanings, there are also the other forms of meaning, such as the evocative meaning. Certain words, which have the ability to evoke images and feelings, are deliberately used to influence the hearer's attitude to what he listens to. Consider the following advertisement:

...Exquisitely roasted by Lipton to a real
Full-bodied flavour.....
Boncafe gives you the original, real
Coffee taste with all the appetizing aroma
That comes with real coffee flavour.

In the above except, certain words like flavour, appetizing, aroma, real and original are imbued with greater meaning and evoke images and feelings.

Advertisements depend a great deal on adjectives for effect. They evoke a vivid picture of what the advertiser wants to show and can cause positive feelings in the audience. This is exemplified in the following:

Experience the luxury of Jojo
For that soft, silkier, thicker
Fuller hair that's unforgettable
Use
Hair care Ronge
.....The best or nothing.

The underlined words show the advertiser's use of adjectives to produce a vivid picture of what he wants to portray. In the above advertisement, the words silkier, thicker, fuller, soft are used to show the qualities of the

product. It can help to prevent hair damage and destruction, smooth, solidify, and soften hair and make hair full. These are the qualities every relaxer is expected to have. It has been compared to other relaxers and has emerged the best one. At the end of the caption, the superlative 'best' is used to show that it is incomparable to other relaxers. Adjectival compounds are also used to show images of products. In this slogan,

...Extra-pearl beauty cream
Hints.....True-life romances
Super-active blue Omo Washes even
Brighter and it shows.

the adjective compounds emphasize the features of the product. The silver is not only a beauty cream but an 'extra- pearl beauty cream' while the Hint magazine contains 'true-life romances'. The blue Omo is 'Super-active'.

New words are continually coined as the need arises in advertising. Sometimes, new words are formed by telescoping two words together to create a third with the connotations of both. The shelltox says: 'New super-shelltox, the hardest-hitting insect killer ever'. The advertiser coined 'super-shelltox' to form a compound word. In the same vein, he formed 'hardest-hitting' from the adjective 'hardest and the participle 'hitting' to form the compound. The meanings of the compounds are derived from the meaning of the two words combined. The strength of the insect killer is shown by the compound 'hardest-hitting'. The two compounds 'super-shelltox' and 'hardest-hitting' connote great value and extra power, respectively.

Non-existing words are coined and used by advertisers for special effect. In the 'Nivea Cream' advertisement, "Nivea Cream...smoothens (sic), moisturizers, and cools" the word 'smoothens' does not exist in the English language. The writer coins and uses it to create sound effect in the caption. The correct verb is 'smooth' but if 'smooth' were used, it would not achieve the sound effect. The phonetic realization of the three words is.

/ s m u : d i n z/, m c : s t u r a i z i z/ and k u L z/. The presenter uses 'smoothens' to maintain the /z/ sound. The phonetic realization of 'smooth' is / s m u : d / . So if he had used it, the slogan would have lost its rhythmical value. Also, the quality 'smooth' is emphasized more by the use of the word 'smoothens' which is associated morphologically with familiar verbs formed by the addition of '-en' to adjectives such as 'brighten' and strengthen'.

Words are sometimes mis-spelt. Consider the following:

Welcome to 8 straight pages
of sixxling entertainment and
society gifts, produced by Sunny Okin.

The word 'sixxling' is mis-spelt by the advertiser for a visual effect. The correct spelling is 'sizzling' which connotes excitement in the context. The word is purposely mis-spelt to attract the viewers and make them think about the caption.

To achieve vivid and exact meaning, advertiser wants to relay to the public, he uses concrete words. Concrete words are Anglo-Saxon words of one or two syllables as can be seen in the following advertisement:

Be our cover model.....
Come over with your costume:
swim suits, bikinis, body hugs
casuals and corporate outfits (sic)
all bold brilliant colours, to
Hints Romance plaza for entry forms

The underlined concrete words: suits, bikinis, body hugs, casusla, outfits (sic), colours, plaza, forms are real. The article can be touched, seen and used and so they are familiar. The senses are not allowed to reason or judge because their meanings are understood. In the above advertisement, all the concrete items are known to the audience and, when the caption is read or listened to, the message is clear. The words suggest the meaning without the advertiser being explicit. The word 'outfits' does not exist in the English language. The correct noun is 'outfit'. It does not have the plural marker /-s/. The writer adds the /-s/ marker for the sound effect of the caption. Other nouns except 'plaza' end in /-s/ and so to maintain the sound, he neglects the linguistic rule and makes his copy pleasing to the ear by the effect of the /-s. sound.

Words are repeated in advertisement for emphasis and to hold the attention of the audience. For instance, Skol beer says, 'Skol...ahead ahead of other'. 'Ahead' is used repetitively to impress on the viewer's mind the quality of the Skol beer. This repetition makes the slogan memorable and lends rhythm to it. Both the pun and repetition hold the attention of the audience and make the caption eye-catching. The listeners are made to play with the word 'ahead'. In this slogan 'Champion, the wining beer, the beer for winners', the repetition of 'winning' and 'winners', emphasizes the certainty of winning

and of a good number of winners. The definite article 'the' which is used to refer to a particular person or thing, is used before 'winning beer' and 'beer for winner' to stress the uniqueness of the beer. The beer is so special that there is no other beer similar to it.

Advertisers, sometimes, use words metaphorically. In this caption, 'Daga strikes pains, headaches and fever... fast', the medicine called 'Daga' has been identified as a dagger, an object, which strikes sharply. The metaphoric use of the word suggests the effectiveness of the medicine and its two functions in the caption. Firstly, it shows the unfailing quality of the product. 'Dagger' strikes things sharply and, therefore, the new product, which is now associated with dagger, performs the function like it. Secondly, it enhances the emotive impact the slogan has on the audience. It urges listeners to want to use the medicine to cure their sickness and then judge the advertiser.

Ambiguity in Captions

Some words seem to have meaning more than others in captions. Such words do not have only a meaning but multiple interpretations. An advertisement is ambiguous if it signals more than one meaning. Most slogan designers are deliberately ambiguous for effect and thought-provoking. Ambiguity arises as a result of a peculiar arrangement of words in a sentence or the use of polysemic words. Consider the following advertisement:

'You can go though life missing a lot'.

This is a case of lexical ambiguity emanating from the word 'missing'. The caption has double meaning. One can go through life without doing those essential things that are necessary for life. Again, if one is blind, one's life can be lived without one seeing many things one ought to see. The slogan can be disambiguated, if a picture of a pair of glasses is shown underneath it. In the following, 'Champion, for a better society', there is lexical ambiguity. The word 'Champion' which is polysemic is ambiguous. It may mean a competitor, a supporter or defender of a cause or an object (product). The three possible meanings include:

- a competitor whose defeat will positively influence society.
- a supporter of a cause who intends to reform society.
- a product like the champion magazine which contains information that may help to reform society.

The importance of the champion magazine is emphasized but until this is specified the audience will be searching for possible meaning. The writer wishes the readers to see the Champion magazine as a product that reforms society. The caption can be disambiguated if the word 'magazine' is added immediately after the word Champion. The caption 'Close up appeal' shows syntactic ambiguity. It can mean something that appeals when it is closed up. It can also mean a product, which appeals to users. In this case, 'close up' is a noun while 'appeal' becomes its verb. But it is grammatically wrong. It would be 'close-up appeals'. The advertisement can be disambiguated if the word 'appeal' is marked with the singular marker /-s/ to depict it as a verb, but the writer wants the audience to think about 'Close-up' as a product that appeals to users when it comes in contact with the teeth. He evades the singular marker for this purpose and it is the absence of the marker that causes ambiguity. This is not a good device and in the words of. Oluikpe (1981:120), 'ambiguity detracts your reader's attention from what is being said and directs it to the sloppiness of the expression.' This is because captions are meant to reach the general public and it is not everybody that has the time to start thinking about what the writer means.

Use of Puns

A really good pun can work miracles. However note the lack of brand identity in the following example, 'Moss Security: Alarmed? You should be'. Almost any competing brand could use these lines. Although they are good, they have no specific identity of their own. In these lines, 'Kenco Really Rich Coffee: Get Rich quick', 'Finish Detergent: Brilliant cleaning starts with Finish'. the brand name appears, but as the solution or promise rather than part of the pun. These slogans with brand name in it can help the name be remembered while offer a two layered meaning to the slogan. The second layer of meaning can interest and impress the people with its smartness and its novelty. In 'Citibank: Because the Citi never sleeps', the brand goes to work, as inextricably part of the pun.

A Semiotic Analysis of the Language of Advertisement

The advertisement below is analyzed in terms of its status as sign whose associative meaning gave a favorable impression of the product. The advert provides an iconic representation of the product and what the product should stand for. The analysis will focus upon the photographic imagery, and the ways in which the imagery generates the appropriate signified concept or emotional overtones which promote the image of the product



The advert strongly relies upon the use of photographic imagery. The example features an advertisement for Delta soap. It uses a variety of signifiers which publicize both the identity of the brand and the image. The advert features female models in their early to mid twenties, and they are smartly captured to show their beautiful skins. Underneath these images is an iconic image of the product itself. Also beside these images are the words: refreshes, protect, moisturizes. On a simple level, it is easy to deduce two obvious things. First, the subject (the image of ladies) provides the youthful element of beautiful skins which serve the product and secondly, that the image of the product is a physical reiteration of the product's name. However, the most interesting semiotic elements of the advert exist within its notion of beautiful skins which is the advert's primary signified concepts. The notion of beautiful skins is primarily conveyed by the image of these good looking ladies, whose skins seem extremely beautiful thus provoking a sense of enjoyment which is also conveyed by their dressing and looks. The softly focused quality of the photography and the advertisement's coloring of gentle pink, yellow, black, and green are further signifiers which constitute to this image of beauty.

However, these images alone certainly do not convey this central signified concept for this is only guaranteed by the inclusion of the advertisements of

the statement: refreshes, protects, and moisturizes. Thus, a strong relationship is allowed to be forged between the signifier (the photographic image of the protagonist and his physical environment) and the signified which is the linguistically expressed refreshes, protects, and moisturizes. Therefore, this stabilization between the signifier and the signified allows for the creation of the plausible commodity code. This code attributes basic meaning to the advert, whose conventional combination of iconic image and linguistic representation (of words and pictures) allows the recipient to receive a message which is justified and reiterated by the relationships of resemblance at play. One group of signifiers in the advert is color. Hence, the role and importance of the color scheme shows that these colors are part of an integral part of an organized system of signifiers which form significant aesthetic codes. The advertisement's coloring of white, pink, green, black and yellow are further signifiers which contribute to the image of refreshment, protection, and moistening.

Conclusion

Advertisers tell the prospective consumer about the existence of their products and services. They try to persuade the consumer to buy through the use of language. The language of advertising suits the advertisers aims which are to inform, entice, excite induce,, the audience to buy. The audience can not believe the copywriter unless he convinces them of the truth in his copy. Believing the advertiser depends on whether he uses his language wisely. To achieve his aims, he must apply imaginative, original, and fresh language. Therefore the novelty and freshness of advertising language is justified for the purpose of attracting people's attention, winning their trust and swaying their thinking. Emotional connotative meaning which are mostly used by advertisers are connected with pleasantries. Adjectives, coined word, and non-existing words are all linked with the images and features of the products. Misspelling is for yisual effect and attraction. The use of concrete words makes for easy understanding. Repetition and metaphor are for emphasis and effectiveness. Punning is linked with remembrance, memorability, interest and impression. Multiple meanings of ambiguous statements inspire readers associations and imagination to attract their attention and to bring their interests, and thus the persuasiveness of the advertisement themselves from enhancement. The presenter may wish to use ambiguity for various purposes but this does not appear to be a very successful device. Captions should be written in such a way that a glance at them suggest the meaning. This is because readers may not have the time to

start deciphering them. Although there is always the danger of ambiguity, it is the writer's job to manipulate the verbal context so that the unwanted connotation do not arise. It is important to note also that signifiers and the signified have a place in the meaning of the language of advertising.

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