

## THE DISCOURSE OF ADVERTISING: THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

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### ABSTRACT

The role of language in advertising is still indispensable in the era of the image and technological invasion. It is the discursive power of advertising discourse that guarantees successful persuasion and creates the need for customers; whether raising their emotions or addressing their cognition, the power of language is capable of commercializing any product better than any other means of communication. This paper examines the power of language in advertising discourse and how it fulfills the persuasive aim of the advertising industry. It uses critical discourse analysis to examine how the discourse of advertisement is constructed and how it buries its manipulative and control structures. The present study investigates the micro and macro levels of analysis and brings to the fore their interaction in the production and consumption of ads discourse.

**Keywords:** Discourse, Advertising Discourse, Power, Persuasion.

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In our modern life, advertisements surround us everywhere. When you turn on your TV, you cannot escape the innumerable and endless broadcasts of commercials urging you to pick up their products. As by the crossroad, your eye will inevitably catch an attentive sight of a billboard or poster of an ad reminding you to join the hundreds of their customers. In newspapers, magazines, on the radio and the Internet, and even in toilets advertisements keep popping and stalking you to invade your wallet and inject in your blood the “faithful customer formula”. Advertising essentially aims at persuading the customer to buy a certain product or accept a given idea. According to Merriam and Webster dictionary, the verb advertise originates from the Latin word “advertere” which means turn the mind towards a specific product with an intention of buying it. One of the interesting definitions of advertising is given by the American Marketing Association which delineates it as “the non-personal communication of information usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature about products, services or ideas by identified sponsor through the various media”.

Nowadays, with the advent of technology and variety of mass media, advertising has reached every corner in the world highly influencing and shaping people’s consumption habits. Ads have taken new shapes and “looks” making use of the implementation of special effects, music, and information technology to better sell their products. Ostensibly, these elements seem to have dominated the advertising industry in recent years overshadowing the role of language in successfully promoting a given product. However, many scholars believe that language remains the most effective persuasive tool in hooking people and convincing them to willingly

buy the advertised product. According to Vestergaard and Schroder (1985, p vii) “advertising takes many forms, but in most of them language is of crucial importance”

Language possesses a charm that sneaks into the minds and tickles our emotions and desires. It employs its unique characteristics and features to haunt us and make us believe, react and act in certain manners. In advertising, Advertising English makes itself different from other genres of English such as Journalistic English or Scientific English. Indeed, advertising English borrows from all the different genres to establish its distinguished discourse. Hence, we can talk about the language of the discourse of advertising as an independent type of language.

Here, the interest revolves around examining the characteristics of advertising English and how language is molded to serve the sell and buy correlation. The language of advertising will be linked and examined under Fowler’s (1981) conceptualization of language as a social practice and how the language of advertising is deployed as a mechanism of social construction; a tool for manipulating the costumers’ spending habits. Backed up by Fowler’s checklist, this paper analyzes the language of advertising as a manipulative social practice with carefully implemented linguistic features. Practically, this paper elaborates on advertising as a type of discourse and then proceeds to discussing the language of ads as a social practice from Fowler’s perspective. The analysis of advertising language is based on samples of ads in English which demonstrate how language exerts certain power to control and direct the desires of the customers.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Advertising as Discourse**

In the area of Discourse Analysis, advertising has forced its existence as a well-established and unique type of discourse. It has forged a distinguished “discursive identity” which encompasses the promoted text (the ad) as well as the context in which people are responding to it. Cook (2001) contends that ads make their meanings from how audiences construct those meanings with reference to their semiotic knowledge of images/signs, genre knowledge, needs and desires. Cook also describes the main characteristics/components of advertising discourse in the following:

- a. Use of array of substances which transmit the text such as physical material (vapor, soap).
- b. In addition to writing and speech, in ads there is an extensive reliance on music and pictures with and intention of entertainment and attention capturing.
- c. A creative and wide use of paralanguage.
- d. Ads’ discourse is parasitic: it feeds on other types of discourses.
- e. It sparks moral, social and aesthetic evaluation of the product in hand scaling from most positive to the most negative.
- f. Participants are crucial in the construction of ads’ discourse: they are the senders and receivers. In advertising, there is usually a difference between sender and addresser and receiver and address. For instance, in a TV ad the addresser may be an actor and the sender is an advertising company and the address maybe a particular target group and the receiver can be anyone who sees the ad.

- g. In discourse, ads rely extensively on the interplay between the main persuasive devices ethos, logos and pathos.

## 2.2 Advertising Functions:

As any type of discourse, ads carry specific and oriented functions. Whether to persuade, warn, amuse or inform ads use strategic techniques to impart their messages. In this context, Gagnon (2003) in his American Marketing Manager's Handbook: The Keys to Sales and Marketing Success Paperback maintains that any ad should fulfill the four main functions as abbreviated in AIDA acronym: Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action:

1. Attention: a successful advertisement should effectively attract and direct the customers' attention towards the product it promotes.
2. Interest: after guaranteeing the customer's attention, the ad should trigger, arouse and maintain their interest.
3. Desire: the ad should fire up and ignite the customer's desire assuring them that all what lacks them is the advertised product.
4. Action: the ad should eventually lead the customer to convincingly buy the product.

## 2.3 Language as a Social Practice: the Example of Language of Ads.

Language is a reflection of any given society's way and view of life. It carries the social and interactive aspects of communities and how they construct hierarchy and order. According to Fairclough (1989) language is a part of society, it is a social process and at the same time it is socially conditioned by other parts of society. It is conditioned in the sense that it exerts power and manipulation on its users. Fowler (1985) defines power as "the ability of people and institutions to control the behavior and material lives of others" (p 61). In the case of advertising discourse, it is undeniable that the power of language is a major element in manipulating and controlling customers' perception and appreciation of the product. Advertisers have taken notice of the power language can exercise on the customers. In this respect, Fairclough (1989) maintains that "nobody who has an interest in modern society, and certainly nobody who has an interest in relationships of power in modern society, can afford to ignore language." (p. 03). It is clear that language, in any type of discourse, ties society and social classes in hegemonic encounters. In advertising, the power of language is embedded in the discourse in such a way that the customers do not feel being manipulated.

In the same direction, Fairclough (2003, p 3) contends that "language contributes to the domination of some people by others." Advertising agencies constitute the dominant group which utilizes the power of language to influence and control the dominated customers. The language of advertisement is tackled by discourse analysts who see it, according to (Boyd, 2009, p79), "as an important force in reshaping social practices, both positively and negatively". Those practices are mainly reflected in consumption habits and awareness raising. In the area of advertising, discourse analysts concern themselves with "what part the language is playing, what is it that the participants are expecting the language to do for them in that situation." Halliday and Hasan (1989, p 12). Accordingly, the language of ads primarily aims at convincing the customers to swallow the bait and head towards buying the product. For that reason, the focus of the power of language includes "the channel (is it spoken or written or some combination of the two?) and also the rhetorical mode, what is being achieved by the text

in terms of such categories as persuasive, expository, didactic, and the like.” (Halliday and Hasan, 1989, p. 12)

### 3.0 METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Theoretical Framework

The study of discourse analysis widened its scope with the born of Critical Discourse analysis. This latter offshoot of discourse study is premised upon the tenets of Critical Linguistics. It essentially deals with and analyzes the criticality of language and its manifestation at the social level. With the works of Fairclough, 1989; Van Dijk, 1991; Wodak, 1997, critical discourse analysis has been able to define its territory and boundary of intervention and focalize, especially, on unveiling and challenging discursive constructs of manipulation, domination, ideology and control buried in any given discourse. Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 272 argue that “CDA assumes that power relations are discursive. In other words, power is transmitted and practiced through discourse. Therefore, we can study ‘how power relations are exercised and negotiated in discourse’”. (Cited in Machin and Mayr, 2012:4). For further elucidation of the core interest of CDA, Bloor and Bloor (2015:12-13) identify a set of objectives CDA is set to accomplish:

- To analyze discourse practices that reflect or construct social problems.
- To investigate how ideologies can become frozen in language and find ways to break the ice.
- To increase awareness of how to apply these objectives to specific cases of injustice, prejudice, and misuse of power.
- To demonstrate the significance of language in the social relations of power.
- To investigate how meaning is created in context.
- To investigate the role of the speaker/writer purpose and authorial stance in the construction of discourse.

#### 3.2 Analytical Method:

Critical discourse analysis is mainly a qualitative analytical framework which seeks, through description, interpretation and explanation, to uncover discursive constructs that serve in maintaining, legitimizing and hiding control and power relations. In this study, textual analysis is applied to analyze advertising discourse through examining words, phrases and sentences. This aims at scrutinizing the micro level of analysis. Then a macro analytical interpretation is conducted to explain the social manifestation of the discursive constructs.

#### 3.3 Data Collection

The collected data this study seeks to analyze is collected randomly from televised and newspaper advertisement. It covers a variety of some of the most advertised brands and it varies between written and oral versions.

### 4.0 DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In the area of adverting, language is a major tool to exert power on customers to “condition” them into certain consumption habits. In the discourse of advertising, control over customers is exerted through using “directive practices” as a type of linguistic process. Directive practices encompass “explicit manipulative speech acts such as commands, requests and proclamations” fowler (1985,p 64). The following ad gives an example of the use of commands and requests:

“You have to use Signal 2 to protect your gum, would you?” (Signal 2 ad)

In the first clause of the sentence the customer is directly commanded to use the product leaving him/her with no other choice; while the second clause of the sentence uses a soft tone to alleviate the impact of the command and with a gentle request.

Linguistic variation is another interesting feature that can be observed in ads. In any society, social classes are deemed to speak differently because they draw from different educational, social and economic backgrounds; this fact imposes on the advertising companies to appropriate their linguistic choices to the targeted social class. In the following ad, Toyota markets two of its cars (Hulix and Prado) to two different social classes.

1. “Ride luxury and unleash the fury” (Toyota Hulix)
2. “ our Prado the least consuming in the market, trust me” (Toyota Prado)

In 1 Toyota seems to market its Hulix to an upper class potential customer who are “obviously” well educated and rich. Its linguistic use is quite sophisticated and metaphoric which ostensibly would be appreciated and effortlessly interpreted by the consumer. Whereas in 2 the Prado seems to be addressed to a lower class customer whose linguistic competence matches his/her concern with the low consumption of the car. The language is plain and direct which does not entail great engagement from the customer. In the following examples, Fowler’s (1981) checklist is used on different ads:

Linguistic features	Ads
Lexicalization	“Clear makes your hair soft, smooth and silky” (Clear Shampoo)
Transitivity	1-“Turkish airlines takes you to the horizons” (Turkish Airlines) 2-“new worlds are for you to discover on our wings” ( Itihad Airlines)
Syntax	1-“I use Head and Shoulders, why don’t you?”(Head and Shoulders Shampoo) 2-“the world is connected by DHL” (DHL delivery)
Modality	“ we certainly guarantee life” (Pharmacology Company)
Implicature	“you will certainly look different, Maybelline like no other” (Maybelline for makeup)
Speech acts	“ we promise success others promise failure” ( American school)
Phonology	“ain’t it yor turn to wine?” ( American football lottery)

In the first ad, lexicalization is a very influential technique to promote the product. In this case the ad makes use of what Halliday (1978) calls “over-lexicalization”. This latter basically stands for the availability of many words to describe something which clearly shows the importance and prominence of the over lexicalized item. In the mentioned ad, the shampooing company over emphasizes its product’s value through the use of various lexical items such as soft, smooth and silky.

The second ad uses transitivity as a linguistic feature to promote its product. The two ads (1 and 2) exemplify two types of transitivity as an emphatic technique. In 1, the name of the company (Turkish airlines) is foregrounded as the agent performing the action to emphasize the company’s name more than the action itself. This will make the customer think of the company’s name first, retain it and recall it easily. In 2, the ad’s focus is on the process of the action. In other words, the service the company provides is foregrounded this time giving the customer a moment to ponder the performance and quality of the service.

Ads also use syntactic phrasing with stylistically significant variations of focus, perspective or emphasis to better promote their products as in the third linguistic feature. Ad 1 exhibits an example of syntactic ellipsis. The phrase “why don’t you?” triggers the customer’s cognitive side to be able to fill in what has been omitted. Elliptical styles are essential in the language of advertising to push the customers to think and retain indirectly. In ad 2, another syntactic manifestation in the language of ads is reflected in passivisation. It is one of the reordering transformations that are applied in ads to shift the emphasis in the information released to the customers. In this example the name of the company “DHL” is left at the end to encapsulate the essence of the message to be imparted to the customer.

In the process of promoting products, advertising language uses modality to establish a certain affinity with the customer. Most of the time, this affinity is strongly based on the company’s ability in holding certainties and solutions. In the example given in modality, the word choice is significantly crucial in promoting the company’s credibility and ability to assure and secure a particular effect, result or solution to the customer.

As in everyday conversations, implicature finds its place in advertising language. Advertisers do not always say things bluntly; rather they many times implicate certain things about their products or about their rivals. In the above example about implicature, the advertising company implicates that the customer does not look in a good way and automatically they are not satisfied with this look; hence, the solution is provided by the company. In the phrase “like no other”, the ad also implicates that other contestants cannot provide an equal or better product than theirs. This leaves the customer with only two choices, either to buy that product or to buy it!

Language of advertising also relies on speech acts to convince the customers. Making requests, promising, commanding or even warning are some of the famous speech act advertisers resort to in marketing their products. The above example reveals an instance of promising as well as warning at the same time. Here the ad uses speech acts to promise the customers of the valuable benefits of the product and warn against any identified or unidentified competing company’s product.

In the last linguistic feature, phonology is also used in the language of advertising. Unlike the previous examples, phonology has to be examined in oral communication. Sounds and sound patterns have social values attached to them. Accent is an example of a socially identified phonological manifestation. It correlates and classifies speakers within social stratification and accords them certain class status. In the given example, the sentence is pronounced by an African American whose black vernacular is very distinguished. The pronunciation of “aint” and the “r” in “yor” clearly shows that the ad is addressed to a specific group or class of people seemingly lower classes and African Americans community.

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

Advertising is rapidly developing like a fire in the dry bush. It is spreading its roots in every corner of the world feeding and rearing the monster of consumerism. The inevitability of encountering this monster is inescapable. For this reason, customers should shield themselves against advertising power and most importantly against its powerful language. Indeed, discourse analysis has equipped us with the necessary tools to be able to meticulously deconstruct, criticize and construct sound judgments. According to Brown and Yule (1983, p1) ‘‘the analysis of discourse is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs’’. Thus, the language of advertising is no exception from other types of discourse languages; it mobilizes its power to hook, seduce and shape its receivers into a desired pattern of mindset and behavior.

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