

## *A Linguistic Analysis of Headlines in Advertising*

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**Abstract:** *Headlines are the most important linguistic element of advertising literature, and they exemplify the typical features of advertising language in an almost ideal way. Therefore, they will serve as the basis for a more meticulous analysis of the linguistic properties of advertising texts in this chapter in order to provide further evidence for the stylistic peculiarities of advertising language. Whereas the picture catches attention, it is the job of the headline to create interest. The headline is the first thing about an advert or catalogue page that is read, and after reading the headline the consumer decides whether or not he will turn the page. Linguistically, headlines are metalinguistic signs which refer the reader to the linguistic signs of a text by providing a summary of the following text or at least mentioning one aspect of the text that is to follow.*

**Keywords:** *advertising, linguistic culture, headlines*

### **Introduction**

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Whereas the picture catches attention, it is the job of the headline to create *interest*. The headline is the first thing about an advert or catalogue page that is read, and after reading the headline the consumer decides whether or not he will turn the page. Linguistically, headlines are metalinguistic signs which refer the reader to the linguistic signs of a text by providing a summary of the following text or at least mentioning one aspect of the text that is to follow. [1, 53] “Inquiry returns show that the headline is 50 to 75 percent of the advertisement”. Thus, the few words of the headline decide over failure or success of an advert. In fact, Caples quotes an example of an ad that sold 19 ½ times as many goods as another – the difference was only in the headline. [2, 13]

To John Caples, one of the icons of American advertising business, the headline was everything. He says: “What do people see of advertising? Headlines! What do you yourself see when glancing through a newspaper or magazine? Headlines! What decides whether or not you stop a moment and look at an advertisement, or even read a little of it? The headline! (...) What good is all the painstaking work on copy if the headline isn’t right? If the headline doesn’t stop people, it might as well be written in Greek. If the headline of an advertisement is poor, the best copywriters in the world can’t write copy that will sell the goods. They haven’t a chance. Because, if the headline is poor, the copy will not be read. And copy that is not read does not sell goods.” [2, 13]

The sample of the headline shall serve as an example to illustrate the functional, stylistic and linguistic features of text in advertisements in general. The characteristic features of headlines apply to most sub-types of advertising copy and can thus be considered typical features of advertising language.

### **1. Stylistic Features of Headlines**

**Conciseness:** Five to eight words are considered the ideal length for a headline. This is the number of digits we can process and remember as one chunk of information. This is also the number of words that fit into one line of bold print. We must keep in mind that in those few words, an entire idea or thought must be conveyed. Therefore, headlines are often elliptical or violate grammatical rules, or rather, there are separate rules for the grammar of headlines (see below).

**Nominal or block style:** The demand of a nominal style is the logical consequence of the headline being short. If we have only 5 to 10 words at our disposal, and we are supposed to express a valid idea with those limited resources, we need to be economical. Function words are an unnecessary burden, because they are semantically empty. The only frequently used function words are the pronouns *you* and *I*. Verbs express action, whereas nouns convey properties, ideas, content. This is what counts in a headline.

**Direct address:** Although this guideline sounds almost trivial, it is one of the most difficult things about writing a headline. Again, it comes down to the requirement that a headline must be customer-specific. The headline has two important tasks: It must select logical prospects for the product. Second, “it offers the prospects a solution to some problem close to their hearts”. [2, 15]

**Active and positive approach:** Both passive constructions and negations take up a longer processing time, because more complex cognitive processes are involved. In general, the recipient first perceives the positive, active, conventional meaning. In a second cognitive process, he then transforms this content into the passive or he negates it. Apart from taking longer, passive constructions and negatives are more often misinterpreted – because the recipient did not take the time for the second transfer process and just perceived the active, the positive, the first-level semantic meaning of the words. From this point of view, the headline *Even deep wrinkles will be reduced* (which could be misremembered as *deep wrinkles* only) could easily be changed into *Reduces deep wrinkles*, which would add to both understanding, clarity and speed of perception.

## 2. Linguistic Peculiarities of Headlines

**Verbs are often left out** for the sake of shortness, resulting in a nominal and elliptic style. What remains are noun clusters resembling extended compounds, such as *single-move pull’n fold mechanism* or *rat skull shape steering box cover*. In these cases, the modifying nouns often take the function of adjectives describing the head noun. In ordinary discourse, a full sentence would have been used to explain those compounds in a clearer way, such as *An innovative mechanism enables you to pull and fold the scooter with a single move*, or *The cover of the steering box is shaped like a rat skull*. Often, the sentence is kept almost intact, with only the verb being omitted, such as in *At last! A steam iron with a magic brain (...has been invented)*, or *(Here is...) A small business offer just for you*. In the latter cases, the sentences are elliptic. The order of syntactic elements is regular, but the writer has left out the information that can be presupposed to be inferred by the reader either from the context, from the illustration or from his common knowledge. When inferring omitted elements, our knowledge of the text type *advertising copy* is often of great help. Since we know that adverts often present new products and inventions, we have little trouble completing the fragment *A steam iron with a magic brain* correctly by adding *has been invented at last*.

**Function words are omitted** frequently. Articles, auxiliaries or prepositions are very often left out. The headline concentrates on the lexical words which lend substance to the message. The reader is attributed a good enough command of the language to complete the structure himself. Moreover, such shortened syntactic structures add to the attention value of a headline, for they present something unusual. As an example, the headline *The tallest recycling story ever told* would read in a full sentence: *This is the tallest recycling story that has ever been told*. Determiner, main verb, relative pronoun and two auxiliaries have been omitted to keep the headline short and catchy.

**The tenses are often used differently from normal discourse.** When verbs are used, the present tense features most prominently, and it is also frequently used to refer to future events, such as in *You can speak French by October 15* or *Why G.E. bulbs give more light this year*. This is also owing to the demand of shortness in headlines. *You will be able to speak French...* takes three more words to explain the same fact – without adding to the meaning.

**The past tense** is mainly used in headlines with a story appeal. Examples are *How I improved my memory in one evening* or *They laughed when I sat down at the piano*.

**The past participle** is used to express the present perfect and past perfect tenses as well as the passive voice. In such cases, the rule applies that auxiliaries are often omitted. Which auxiliary that is can be found out easily from context and grammatical structure. *A toothbrush guaranteed for 6 months* is short for the passive sentence *A toothbrush that is guaranteed for 6 months*. This form of short relative clauses is popular in colloquial language, too. The past participle in *Just published* expresses both the passive voice and the present perfect. Subject and auxiliaries have been omitted, the full sentence would read: *This encyclopaedia [can be seen in the picture] has just been published*.

**Imperatives** feature very prominently in advertising headlines. Those headlines pursue the “hard sell” strategy and get straight down to urging the reader to act. They function directly at the behavioural stage. The range of imperatives covers the blatant request, such as *Order now...Pay after January 10* or the negative imperative *Don't buy car insurance until you have read these facts*. Some of the imperatives are rather hidden, because they could just as well pass as ellipses where subject and pronoun have been omitted, such as *Burn fat faster*, which could also be interpreted as *You will burn fat faster (...when you use our product)*. Other imperatives are rather an advice, such as *Grow up. Not old* or *You've earned it. Now enjoy it*. De Voe points out that imperatives have also the power of addressing people directly [2, 67], and Myers reminds us to “note that advertisers use commands, not because telling you to do something really makes you do what they say, but because it will create a personal effect, a sense of one person talking to another.” [3]

**Conditional Sentences** are also popular with copywriters. Conditional type 1 and 2 occur quite often, such as *If they ever build an autobahn stateside, you'll be ready* (Type 1) or *If they gave awards for cash management, we'd be thanking the academy* (Type 2). These two types of conditional clauses do have a reference to reality, they express realistic conditions, which is essential to an advertising promise. This is also the reason why type 3 is extremely unlikely to appear in a headline, since a statement like *If we had invented these running shoes earlier, you wouldn't have ruined your knees* fails to promise any realistic solution to the consumer and offers no incentive to buy.

It is notable, however, that the conditional clauses used in headlines are often followed by a present form in the main clause. That means, the statement following the if-clause does not express a possibility, but it refers to a fact or a realistic condition which can be fulfilled. [4] This gives propositions made in the main clause the flavour of being true – as a matter of fact. Whereas a *will*-form in the main clause leaves a trace of the chance of not being fulfilled, there is no doubt about the truth of a present form in the main clause. Promises such as *If you savour growth and security, we give an edge* or *If you want a worthy comparison, ask to see it in green* offer a solution that is realistic, tangible, and true. It's situated neither in the future nor in the past, but you can go to the shop right now and fulfil your condition.

**Direct references** to the product, such as *this* or *these* can be very important for the success of a headline. Caples quotes the example of the two headlines 1) “Are you afraid of making mistakes in English?” and 2) “Do you make these mistakes in English?” [5, 147] Headline 2) was tested considerably more successful than 1). The reason is the direct reference *these*, which builds a cohesive link to the body copy and thus initiates the reader to read on. The demonstrative pronouns *this* or *these* are deictic in character. [2, 14] This means they always refer to something concrete, to something that is close in space, and this makes the ad interesting. “This arouses the reader's curiosity and self-interest. Here is free information.” [6, 414] Thus, the appeal used in the headline should always be expressed as concretely as possible in order to show the reader that the solution to his problems is right here.

Whether a headline should be formulated as a **question** is one of the most controversial issues among advertising professionals. David Ogilvy was one of the staunchest opponents of question-headlines. He was convinced that headlines which only make sense after reading the copy are “blind”. The reader must be provided the most important information at first glance. This is in accordance with Caple's opinion that the best sales argument must be presented at the most prominent place – and that is the

headline. The best appeal is wasted if it is hidden in the copy. After all, the copy is read by less than 5% of the audience.

On the other hand, a headline that poses an open question is one of the best incentives to actually read the copy. A headline such as *Can you pass this memory test?* clearly invites the reader to carry on reading and to find out more. However, this technique only works if the question contains at least one direct, naturally a cataphoric reference [2, 14] to the copy and if the reader can infer there from that his question is going to be answered. (...) *this memory test* is a cataphoric reference to the copy, just as the *which* in *Which is the best battery value for your car?* The reader knows that he will find the solution in the copy, and this stimulates him to read on.

The most frequently used **pronouns** in headlines are *you* and *I*. From this fact we can conclude that ads aim at constructing a dialogue between the sender and the reader. The form *you* addresses the reader directly, which is an essential tool for catching his attention. The more personally relevant an ad is, the more attention it will get. The use of 2nd person pronouns is one step in that direction.

### Conclusions

The first person singular pronoun *I* features very frequently in headlines of American ads. This can be directly related to the popularity of so-called testimonial ads there. Testimonials are adverts that quote a direct statement either from an expert in this field or from a satisfied customer who is a person “like you and me”.

Another effect of using the pronouns *you* and *I* in a headline is the creation of an intimate relation between (anonymous) sender and (mass audience) recipient. The attributes *anonymous* and *mass audience* become blurred in a sentence like *Let me tell you how I reduced for creeps*. The lucky circumstance that *you* can refer both to a singular and a plural recipient in English facilitates pseudo-personal communication. It sounds as if the person in the paper was speaking just to me. This makes believe the communicative setting is personal – a situation that is much more effective for influencing people. Personal communication is much better suited to influence people than mass communication. Behind the veil of *you-and-I*, clever advertisers make language work for them.

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