# Linguistic Features of the Language of Advertising

**Mihaela VASILOAIA**
**George Bacovia University, Bacau, ROMANIA**

**Key-words:** *advertising, language, communication, linguistic features*
**Abstract:** Is there such a thing as advertising language? Certainly, the language of advertising is neither variety nor a register in its own right. Rather, the language of advertising is able to take on any form that required for communicating its message, thus covering and utilising the entire linguistic continuum. After a speaking the language of the recipient is one of the major prerequisites of successful sales talk. It has to noted that the description of the linguistic features of advertising language does not represent comprehensive overview, but rather an operational selection with regard to which of the numerous linguis features and details can actually be operationalised for serving the marketing-relevant functions advertising.

Advertising is an inevitable part of the modern capitalist consumer society whose outstanding feature is its competitive fight. The aim of advertising is to be catchy and easy to remember. Advertisers use language quite distinctively: there are advantages in making bizarre and controversial statements in unusual ways as well as communicating with people using simple, straightforward language. Copy-writers are well-known for playing with words and manipulating or distorting their everyday meanings. They break the rules of language for effect, use words out of context and even make up new ones.

In its simplest sense, the word **advertising** means "drawing attention to something", or notifying or informing somebody or something. You can advertise by word of mouth, quite informally and locally, and without incurring great expense. But if you want to inform a large number of people about something, you might need to advertise in the now familiar sense of the word, by public announcement.

The text type "advertising text" will be considered a rather prototypical type, and I will focus on the prototypical features rather than the peripheral variations. One has to bear in mind, however, that variation and creativity plays a major role in advertising language in particular. Without doubt, the ability to ceaselessly reinvent itself, to produce ever new shapes and to create ever more unexpected elements of surprise to attract attention and to remain up to date is one of the most typical features of advertising language in general. Advertising language has always tried to change styles and to break the conventions; I would even go as far as to say that change is one of the most fundamental stylistic principles of advertising language, also against the background of its function to create ever new attention and to move with the times.

Bearing in mind that this enormous creative potential is one of the fundamental features of the text type of advertising in general, it can be said, though, that the other basic features, such as the simple syntactic structure, the direct appeal to the recipients, the high rate of repetition etc. remain largely

unaffected by the creative variation.[1] After all, in spite of all its creative activity, the text type of advertising copy has to remain recognisable to the recipients as such and to meet their basic expectations. Moreover, the companies commissioning the creation of advertising texts put a premium on security. They want to rest assured that the money they invest in their advertising campaign meets their objectives, and the safest way to reach that aim is to rely on tested and proven techniques and strategies, also from a linguistic point of view. Thus, in spite of inevitable variations and deviations from the prototypical "norm" of an advertising text, the majority of the texts adhere to these proven and established principles described below. Advertising language can be defined by its major functions, i.e. to attract attention and to persuade people to buy the product or service it presents. As Cook rightly claims, "this is not the only function. (An ad) may also amuse, inform, misinform, worry or warn."[2] But from the predominant persuasive function, a set of typical linguistic features can be derived, which can be considered characteristic of the language of advertising, as they best serve the purpose of attracting attention, persuading and convincing as well as entertaining the recipients.

The appellative function is the first and foremost function of advertising language. However, this does not always become clearly obvious, and the function to appeal to the recipients and persuade them to buy is often concealed underneath or accompanied by other functions such as the descriptive, narrative, expressive or poetic and aesthetic function of language.

Descriptive language in advertising is most frequently found in product descriptions. However, the descriptive function of advertising texts is only fulfilled in very few cases. Narrative elements are essential to so-called testimonial ads where pseudo-users report on their experience of using the product. Advertising language takes on an expressive function when the sender of the message, i.e. the company advertising its products or services, makes statements about their history, philosophy and visions.[3]

Last but not least, the language of advertising frequently uses figures of speech and other stylistic devices that are considered typical of poetic language, such as puns, metaphors, neologisms, alliteration, assonance or rhyme. This bears witness to the high degree of creativity involved in advertising language and contributes to the secondary function of advertising to entertain the recipients.

Due to its highly appellative character, advertising language is one of the most efficient vehicles of ideology. Leech has called the language of advertising "loaded language"[4], describing its intention to influence and change the will and the attitude of its recipients. A book on advertising by D. Bolinger even bears the title "Language: The Loaded Weapon".[5] This aim is achieved by using simple language with a relatively weak structure grouped around a simple unit of meaning that can be easily remembered. Hughes has called advertising "linguistic capitalism", maintaining that "advertising is, from a linguistic point of view, a dubious manifestation of free enterprise in which the language, the common property of the speech-community, becomes a natural resource which is exploited by agencies in the sectional interests of their clients' marketing programmes."[6]

Leech identifies four major functions of a successful advertisement, each of which has consequences on the language used to achieve those aims[7]:

1. ATTENTION VALUE

Adverts need to attract attention and arouse curiosity. On the linguistic level, this can be achieved by breaking conventions of language use such as using wrong spelling, neologisms, puns, grammatical solecism, rhymes, semantic deviations and putting language in inappropriate or unorthodox contexts.

2. READABILITY

Once the advert has succeeded in catching the reader's attention, this interest needs to be sustained, always reckoning with the fact that the reader searches for quick and simple information. Therefore, the style of adverts is mostly colloquial, using simple and familiar vocabulary. Leech has called this practice of using informal language associated with private contexts in public or business communication "public colloquialism".[8] Informal styles suggest an easy-going social relationship between reader and writer, and they are characterised by informal address terms, direct address to the reader,

---

[1] If changes in these basic features occur, they mainly function as deliberate violations in order to attract attention or to establish a special tone of voice. If, for example, a brochure of a private bank displays long-winded sentences and high-end vocabulary, the recipient will notice this deviation from the norm as a special creative approach.
[2] G. Cook, *The Discourse of Advertising* , London, Routledge, 1992,, p. 5
[3] Cf. Idem, Ibidem, p. 6.
[4] Cf. Geoffrey Leech, *English in Advertising* , London, Longman, 1966, p. 23
[5] Cf. D. Bolinger, *Language: The Loaded Weapon,* London, Longman, 1980
[6] G. Hughes, *Words in time*, London, Blackwell, 1987, p. 159. Hughes adds: "Words have the added advantage of being free for the taking, unlike images and sounds, which cost money to make." (ibid)
[7] Cf. Geoffrey Leech, *Op. cit.,* p. 123
[8] Cf. Idem, ibidem

mostly with the second person pronoun *you*, casual colloquial expressions and a relative lack of politeness markers.[9] In adverts, even written language shows many features of spoken language. [10]

First, advertising language is characterised by a high level of redundancy due to a high degree of repetition and parallelism. Moreover, there is the frequent use of deictics referring either to the user as an exophoric referent or to endophoric references such as pictures and other sentences in the copy. Terms like *this*, *that*, *those*, *it*, *here* and *there* indicate items in the immediate context and occur very frequently in advertising copy. Elliptic sentence structures are another sign of spoken communication that are typical of advertising language. Moreover, phrasal verbs, idioms and contractions are characteristic features of advertising language bearing witness to its strong degree of colloquialism.

### 3. MEMORABILITY

The message of an advert needs to be remembered by the recipient and recognised as familiar. Repetition is one of the most frequent techniques used in advertising to enhance memorability.

From a linguistic point of view, several linguistic devices are highly repetitive by definition and therefore feature fairly frequently in advertising language, such as alliteration (repeating the initial sound), metrical rhythm (repeating the same rhythmic pattern), rhyme (repeating the same ending sounds), grammatical parallelism (repeating the same grammatical structure) as well as semantic and syntactic repetition (i.e. using the same syntactic structure or words from the same word field) and lexical repetition. It has to be noted that repetition and variation often go hand in hand. Semantic repetition, i.e. the repeated use of different words from the same word field, is an incidence of lexical variation which at the same time functions as a repetitive device.

Moreover, the continuous repetition of slogans, brands and product names equally contributes to the memorability of the product and the related advertising messages.

### 4. SELLING POWER

Ultimately, advertisements want to sell. Prompting people to take the right kind of action can be best achieved by clear instructions as what to do next. Imperatives are ideally suited to tell people clearly what kind of action to take and therefore feature very frequently in advertising language. Not without reason are imperatives, one of the most frequently used syntactic forms in advertising language.[11] Due to the tendency to use elliptical sentence structures and omitting subjects, however, imperatives are often not perceived as open instructions but rather as shortened sentences or fragments of statements.

Moreover, advertising copy strives to be positive and to give its recipients a positive outlook. Prohibitions and negative forms are usually avoided, unless they are used as an element of surprise to create attention value. This approach is also justified from a psychological and cognitive perspective, as negative forms require a longer processing time than positive statements. The strategy of using positive forms also extends to the lexical level. Particularly adjectives with a positive meaning play a major role in advertising language.[12] Leech quotes the following adjectives to be among the most frequent ones in advertising language: *new*, *good / better / best*, *sure*, *delicious*, *free*, *fresh*, *nice*.[13] All of these words have an entirely positive meaning. John Caples advises advertisers to "avoid, when possible, headlines that paint the gloomy or negative side of the picture. Take the cheerful, positive angle."[14]

## 1.1. Linguistic Means Used in Advertising Language

Advertising language often uses the techniques similar to those in poetic texts. The advantage of so-called mnemonic devices (rhyme, rhythm, alliteration and assonance) is the mnemotechnical effect. It guarantees that the receiver of the advertisement better remembers the text and recalls it at the right moment.

*a) Rhyme*

Rhyme is a pattern of "identity of sound between words or verse-lines extending from the end to the last fully accented vowel and not further."[15] Rhyme refers to sounds, not spelling. It is commonly found in jingles, slogans and headlines.

e.g. "Eukanuba gives their teeth the strength they need."[16]

*b) Rhythm*

The aim of advertising is to be catchy and easy to remember. One of the devices how copywriters can reach it is to use prosodic features – intonation, rhythm and lexical stress - because they have a great

[9] Cf. T. Shortis, *The Language of ICT* , London,  Routledge 2001, p. 24

[10] Cf. A. Goddard, *The Language of Advertising*,  London,  Routledge, 1998,  p. 41

[11] Cf. Geoffrey Leech, *Op. cit.,* p.141

[12] Cf. Gieszinger, S., *The History of Advertising Language,* Frankfurt / Main, Lang 2001, p. 154

[13] Cf. Leech, G., *English in Advertising,* London, Longman, 1966, p. 57

[14] Caples, J., *Tested Advertising Methods,*  Englewood , Prentice-Hall, 1994, p. 31

[15] Concise Oxford English Dictionary 2004

[16] www.eukanuba-eu.com/

emotional and mnemonic effect. Copywriters often use language with rhythmical arrangement. The listener or reader need not notice it and he perceives it only subconsciously. The result is that the text is memorable and linguistically neat. If the rhythm has some regularity, it is called metre. "Metre is a pattern composed of rhythm groups (feet) consisting of similar or identical patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. (…) Metrical scheme may easily pass unnoticed.)"[17]

English poetry has various types of metrical feet. Among the most important ones there are: *the iamb* (an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable: x / ), *the trochee* (a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one: / x ), *the dactyl* (a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables: / x x ), *the spondee* (consisting of two stressed syllables: / / ), *the pyrrhic* (two unstressed syllables: x x ), and *the anapest* (two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one: x x / ). Advertisement slogans often benefit from the metrical regularity:

e.g. "*Fla*tter your *fi*gure with *Di*etrim."[18] This slogan is composed of three dactyls.

/ x      x  /  x x / x     x

'flæ/t_(r) j_(r) 'fI/g_(r) wIð 'daI/_/trIm

*c) Alliteration*

Alliteration can be defined as "literary technique, in which successive words (more strictly, stressed syllables) begin with the same consonant sound or letter."[19] It is widely used in advertising slogans.

e.g. "*P*erformance. *P*restige. *P*assion for Innovation."[20]

*d) Assonance*

Assonance is a linguistic device, in which the same vowel in successive stressed syllables creates a vowel harmony. It is not so obvious type of scheme as alliteration.

e.g. "How much re**a**lity c**a**n you h**a**ndle?"[21]

*e) Graphic aspect of the text*

The graphic aspect of the text deals only with graphic elaboration of the text. Almost all printed advertisements exploit from the fact of being printed. Copywriters have to decide how to make the layout. The selection of script, its colour, type and size is the inevitable part of making a good advertisement. However, not only this may contribute to the final effect. The other possibilities are:

• *Unpredictable spelling of words* ("Beanz Meanz Heinz", "4ever", "Bar B Q", "süper", etc.)

• *Higher frequency of low-frequent letters* that produce outstanding sounds ('X' is very popular: "Xerox", "Botox" and use of palato-alveolar consonants /tʃ/, /ʃ/, /d_/).

• *Unexpected print of letters* - whether the size or their shape is similar to some object and this object replaces the letter.

• *Acronyms and initialisms with graphic exploitation* – the letters of abbreviation create the first letters of words. The effect is highlighted by means of colour, size or layout:

e.g. "*X*TROVERT. *X*PLOSIVE. *L*OVE THE COLOUR. COLOR *XXL*"

*f) Transliteration*

Using of transliteration in advertisement is not so frequent, but when occurred, it makes a positive result. It definitely attracts reader's attention. Transliteration means the transformation of foreign words into English. Usually the spelling of the foreign word is different but the pronunciation in these special cases is the same as English:

e.g. "BE COINTREAUVERSIAL."[22] (COINTREAU is the name of French alcoholic drink)

## 1.2. Functional and Practical Stylistics of Advertising Language

These functional requirements described above result in a functional advertising style, which is determined by the correlation of exophoric determinants such as the fields of application, the relationship between sender and recipient, the modes of communication and the social functions of this text type on the one hand and typical modes of use on the other. Against the background of a discourse of advertising, it becomes obvious that the linguistic features of advertising cannot be described without reference to the situation in which this text type occurs.

Thus, the heavy use of the pronoun *you* cannot be seen in isolation from the appellative character of adverts, with the sender trying to present a personal appeal to the recipients in order to persuade them to ultimately buy their product. The pseudo-personal appeal of the pronoun *you* must be considered in conjunction with the media of mass communication, which are the major mode of distributing advertising messages. Although every recipient knows that *you* actually refers to an audience of many millions of people, they are still inclined to believe that they are personally being addressed.

---

[17] Geoffrey Leech, *Op. cit.,* p.186

[18] www.vitabiotics.com/**dietrim**/

[19] http://www.wikipedia.org/

[20] http://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/pdf/MANN_Jewelers.pdf

[21] www.samsung.com/

[22] www.becointreauversial.com

Furthermore, the predominance of positive grammatical forms and lexical items with a favourable meaning can be traced back to the social function of motivating the recipient to follow the instructions of the sender and to go and buy these products. This peculiarity can also be seen in relation to the pragmatic nature of advertising texts as acts of persuasion, which naturally focus on a favourable way of presentation.

Thus, the functional style of advertising language, whose characteristic features are outlined below, sets the guidelines for practical stylistics, describing, rather than prescribing, what advertising language should be like. It is a matter of fact that, in spite of the much-appraised creativity of the text type of advertising language, it follows a fairly narrow scheme of linguistic features which make advertising copy easily recognisable as such and provide the recipient with a guideline of how to interpret the statements and how to deal with such texts. By not adhering to these standards, the expectations of the recipient can be severely violated, leading to frustration and misunderstanding.

**References:**

Bolinger, D. (1980), *Language: The Loaded Weapon,* London, Longman.
Caples, J. (1994): *Tested Advertising Methods,* Englewood , Prentice-Hall.
Cook, G. (1992): *Discourse of Advertising*, London, Routledge.
Gieszinger, S. (2001): *The History of Advertising Language,* Frankfurt / Main, Lang.
Goddard, A. (1998): *The Language of Advertising*, London, Routledge.
 Hughes, G. (1987), *Words in time*, London, Blackwell.
Leech, Geoffrey (1966), *English in Advertising,* London, Longman.
Shortis, T. (2001) *The Language of ICT,* London, Routledge.
Concise Oxford English Dictionary 2004
www.eukanuba-eu.com
www.becointreauversial.com
www.vitabiotics.com/**dietrim**
www.wikipedia.org
www.clevelandjewishnews.com/pdf/MANN_Jewelers.pdf
www.samsung.com