Semantic Ambiguity in Advertising Language

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Abstract: *Advertising language needs to be rather vague on the lexical-semantic level. Advertising language is highly ambiguous, avoiding clear and concrete statements and resorting to vague utterances that offer numerous layers of potential interpretation. Ambiguity in advertising becomes manifest on the levels of semantics, syntax and reference. In this article, I will approach ambiguity at a semantic level.*
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Introduction

In order to be simple, memorable and persuasive at the same time, advertising language needs to be rather vague on the lexical-semantic level. Advertising language is highly ambiguous, avoiding clear and concrete statements and resorting to vague utterances that offer numerous layers of potential interpretation. Ambiguity in advertising becomes manifest on the levels of semantics, syntax and reference. In this article, I will approach ambiguity at a semantic level.

1. Semantic Ambiguity

On a lexical level, advertising favours words with multiple meanings, or, as these have been called in an advertising context, "weasel words" [1, 169]: "A weasel-word is one which, by its calculated ambiguity, erodes the meaning of the phrase or sentence in which it is used." A favourite strategy used by advertisers to create ambiguity is the literal interpretation of idiomatic expressions. Hughes quotes the examples "Every girl needs her Mum" (deodorant), "We have your interest at heart" (bank) or "the down to earth garden tool".[2, 162] Cook calls these expressions "visual metaphors" [3, 54], which can occur in two different forms: either the phrase is written and its two senses illustrated, as in an ad for Gordon's Gin which has been poured "over jaffa" (i.e. an orange), visualised by a person holding this glass in their hands and standing on a balcony with a view over the city of Jaffa. In other cases, "a phrase can be evoked wholly pictorially, without any use of writing at all," such as in a washing powder ad where money is pouring down the drain. Cook maintains that this technique is used to revitalize many dead metaphors, which supports Myers' view that "an ad can bring the deadest of metaphors back to life in the right circumstances." [4, 125]

Semantic ambiguity is one of the best eye-catchers. Here is an example from Caples [5, 102]: "Tired of the daily grind? Try our monthly grind." (coffee) Here, the pun is based on the ambiguity of the word *grind*: 1) daily chores, and 2) ground coffee. Moreover, there are phonetic as well as syntactic parallels between the two sentences. *Tired* alliterates with *try*, and *daily* is located on the same semantic continuum as *monthly*.

Another example is: *Grow up. Not old.* Based on the phrasal meanings of two combinations with the verb *to grow*, the two phases are linked by the ellipsis in the second phrase. The reader automatically infers the missing verb, thereby linking the two clauses to one meaningful and funny unit.

In an advert for MZ motorcycles that was aimed at recruiting dealers in the US, we formulated the headline: *MZ gets you on a roll*. In the context of motorcycles, and placed underneath a picture of a victory parade of old MZ bikes, this phrase lives on its double meaning. *To get someone on a roll* means *to make someone ride a motorcycle*, which supports the idea expressed in the picture. At the same time, it means *to make someone successful*, which incorporates the strong appeal to potential dealers, which is in plain words: *If you sell MZ motorcycles, you can make good money*. Plays on the verb *to roll* were

continued throughout the copy, in sentences such as *MZs are rolling out all over America* and *Enrol as a dealer now*.

Advertisers play a major role in shaping society's values and habits. In general, the success of advertising depends not on its logical proposition but rather on the fantasies it provides. The world of ads is a dream world where people and objects are taken out from their material context and given new symbolic meanings, placed on hoardings. Everything means something to somebody, whether people realize it consciously or it stays in their unconscious. At the same time it is important to note that the creator behind meaning, even if it is incredible vague, brings their own background and collection of connotative meaning and associations to the piece. By overlaying image with words, which are in themselves signifier, we create a wide array of meaning that can be various and that is completely arbitrary. As we are confronted with images and text, our mind starts to associate all of the signifiers within a construct with our own personal experiences, knowledge, emotions and feelings. So even if the creator of such a construct never intended for it to have any meaning it is as good as impossible to rule out any associations for the viewer

2. Puns

Not without reason are wordplays a favoured linguistic means in advertising copy, on the one hand attracting attention due to their element of surprise, and on the other hand offering at least two possible levels of meaning. Moreover, there is the element of humour in puns which, according to Tanaka, is one way of overcoming the distrust that the addressee holds towards the sender. [6, 59] Tanaka noted that the "lack of trust and social co-operation between communicator and addressee creates problems for the advertiser, and it is suggested (…) that humour, more specifically punning, is one way in which the advertiser attempts to improve social relations with his audience."

Many advertisers, however, hold the view that puns are not an adequate means of conveying sales messages to the recipient. Redfern reports on a survey he conducted among leading advertising agencies, and he quotes one ex-advertiser's words: "Spending money is usually a serious business…People do not buy from clowns." [7, 130] The assumption that advertisers tend to consider wordplay outdated but still rely heavily on using it is illustrated convincingly in Gieszinger's investigation of the history of advertising language. She produces evidence that "language play has become increasingly popular among advertisers. The number of advertisements including rhetorical figures and/or linguistic jokes has grown considerably since the eighteenth century." [8, 157]

Tanaka also suggests that there are cultural differences in the use and popularity of puns, quoting *The Independent* from 1 July 1992: "The British like humour, especially irony and puns." Bürli-Storz also shares the view that "a specialty of the language of British advertising is the use of humour" [9, 9], and even advertising icon David Ogilvy points out that "British commercials tend to be less direct…funnier and more entertaining" [10, 173] compared to their American counterparts.

Pun has been defined as "the humorous use of a word to suggest different meanings, or of words of the same sound and different meanings" [11, 1110]. Polysemy (words with several related meanings), homonyms (two formally identical lexemes, which are semantically unrelated), and homophones (different words sounding the same) are the basis for punning.

An example for a pun based on homonyms is an advert of London Transport, which read: *Less bread. No jam.* At first glance, this hardly makes sense, as both words seem to refer to food items. The meaning of this utterance can only be understood when the secondary level of meaning is unfolded. Considering that *bread* is not only something to eat but also a slang term for *money* and that *jam* does not only refer to a sweet food but also to cars stuck in traffic, the double meaning becomes clear: Pay less, and enjoy trouble-free transport.

Homophony is the basis for deciphering the following pun, which was used by a Saxon manufacturer of dyeing chemicals in an advert run in the UK: *We need water for living. Not for dyeing.* On a phonetic level, [daɪ̯ɪŋ] can refer to the forms *dyeing* and *dying* at the same time. The first and obvious

interpretation is *dying*, due to the close proximity and the contrast with *living* that is established by the context, since both lexemes come from the same word field. The spelling, however, creates an element of surprise, as it refers to exactly the other form than the one the reader would have inferred from the context. Only when the reader indulges deeper in the text will he find out that the company has developed a new dyeing auxiliary that uses much less water than other methods and that it therefore helps preserve life.

Very often, ambiguity has a clear erotic component of meaning, and advertising copies are full of sexual insinuations. Covert eroticism can be conveyed by means of stereotypical expressions such as *love at first sight*, in associative product names such as *Naughties* for women's underwear or *Lip Blushers* for a new lipstick, or in ambiguous phrases and headlines, e.g. *Kidnap your wife*.

That justly rouses the question of relevance. It is true that puns often violate the expectation of the reader to find relevant information at first sight, referring to Grice's maxims of quantity and manner [12, 41-58] that should apply to all linguistic utterances. "Advertisements including linguistic jokes do not provide sufficient contextual information to disambiguate the ambiguous item at once and/or contain obscure expressions." Therefore, "recipients have to put more effort into resolving linguistic jokes, because text producers violate the maxims of quantity and manner."

Tanaka explains the functioning of a pun from the Relevance Theory point of view as follows: "two or more interpretations are intentionally triggered by the speaker of a pun, but the hearer rejects the most accessible interpretations in search of a more acceptable interpretation. The speaker usually intends to communicate a single interpretation which the hearer has to recover…. Thus the essence of the pun lies in its access to multiple interpretations."[13, 62] Only when the recipient knows both meanings can he see the humour in the pun. That is one of the reasons why using puns is so difficult with non-native speakers of the language, as their knowledge of the language might be confined to only the most obvious, the primary meaning of the word.

Punning is frequently used in commercial advertising to attract the reader's attention and maintaining her/his interest in keeping with the AIDA principle whereby the language of advertising must attract the Attention of the prospective buyer, maintain her/his Interest, create a Desire, and get her/him into Action. By playing with the similarity of form and the difference in meaning of given lexical items, the advertiser entices the reader to grasp the double meaning conveyed by the message, as if it were a sort of puzzle. Moreover, the reader is gratified for having understood the witticism, this contributing to fulfilling the text's conative function. Delabastita defines wordplay as a textual phenomenon, a fact of language which is inextricably linked to the structural features of language [14], puns are also intimately bound up with the culture of a language, reflecting particular values, tastes and lifestyles. Furthermore, because of their humorous are ideally suited to render commercial advertising companies worldwide. A really good pun can work miracles. However, there are examples of adverts lacking brand identity. Almost any competing brand could use these lines.

Moss Security: Alarmed? You should be.
Wyborowa Vodka: Enjoyed for centuries straight.
Pioneer: Everything you hear is true.

The Economist: For top laps.
Range Rover: It's how the smooth take the rough.
Holiday Inn: Pleasing people the world over.
Casio: Precisely what you're looking for.
Weight Watchers Frozen Meals: Taste. Not waist.
Northern Telecom: Technology the world calls on.
Zanussi: The appliance of science.
Source: http://www.e-sgh.pl/cia/lexical_stylistic_devices.pdf

In the following table, the brand name appears, but as the solution or promise rather than part of the fun.

Flowers Fine Ales: Always pick Flowers.
Barbados: Barbados. Goodness. Gracious.
Finish Detergent: Brilliant cleaning starts with Finish.
British Steel: British Steel: British mettle.
First National Bank of Chicago: First relationships last.
Coffee: Get Rich quick.
St. Ivel Shape Yogurt: Get your family into Shape, without them even noticing.
Kodak Gold: Is your film as good as Gold?
Asda: It 'asda be Asda.
HMV: No HMV, no video.
Ritz Crackers: Nothing fitz like a Ritz.
John Deere Tractors: Nothing runs like a Deere
Mumm's Champagne: One word captures the moment. Mumm's the word.
Money Magazine: Reap the rewards of Money.
Red Star: Send your parcels Red Star and pull out all the stops.
Tetley Tea: Tetley make teabags make tea.
Tic Tac Candy: Tic Tac. Surely the best tactic.
Impulse Deodorant: You just can't help acting on Impulse.
Source: http://www.e-sgh.pl/cia/lexical_stylistic_devices.pdf

In the following table, the brand goes to work, inextricably part of the pun.

Absolut Vodka: Absolut magic.
Citibank: Because the Citi never sleeps.
Frosted Chex: Chexellent, or what?
Quavers Snacks: Do me a Quaver.
Thomas Cook: Don't just book it, Thomas Cook it.
Nytol Sleeping Pills: Good mornings follow a good Nytol.
IBM: I think, therefore IBM.
Abbey National Building Society: Investments with Abbey endings.
Cutty Sark Whisky: Live a Cutty above.
Stores: Lowering prices forever, that's Comet sense.
Arthur's Cat Food: Nothing else is Arthur's good.
Skoda Favorit: Put your money on the Favorit.
Farley's Baby Food: So Farley's, so good.
Thomas Cook Travel: Take a Thomas Cook at our prices!
Immac Depilatory: The look is Immac-ulate
Visa Delta Debit Card: Visa's Delta blow to cheques
Cadbury's Wispa Candy: You can't keep quiet about a Wispa
Campari Aperitif: You'll find there is no Camparison.
Wike Farms Cheese: You'll Wike it too.
Source: http://www.e-sgh.pl/cia/lexical_stylistic_devices.pdf

Generally speaking, wordplay (or pun) is a witticism that relies for its effect on playing with different levels of language, i.e. phonological, graphological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, and textual. Puns and idioms are frequently used in commercial advertising as a rhetorical device to promote a given product or service by creating humour, attracting the reader's attention and adding persuasive force to the message. They also reflect the cultural preferences and traditions of a country, therefore they can be fruitfully used for pedagogic purposes to raise awareness of the specific linguistic and cultural features of the foreign language.

3. Metaphors

Another semantic means of using ambiguity in advertising language are metaphors, defined as "a non-literal level of meaning where one thing is represented as another."[15, 83] Two ideas or objects are compared to each other, without the *tertium comparationis* being mentioned. The *tertium comparationis* is the quality that the analogy is based upon, i.e. if we say *She is as fresh as an apple*, the quality of freshness is the *tertium comparationis* that justifies the comparison. If the analogy is expressed as above, i.e. if the *tertium comparationis* is mentioned explicitly, it is called a simile. In a metaphor, however, the recipient has to figure out the reason of the analogy himself – the example stated above would read as a metaphor: *She is an apple*. [16, 146] In advertising, the key to interpreting the metaphor correctly is usually provided by the brand name, the headline or body copy or by the visual elements of the advert.

Aitchison holds that the incomparability of the semantic features of the two items compared in a metaphor is one of the basic preconditions for the functioning of the figure of speech. *Whiskey is wine* does therefore not make a good metaphor, since the semantic features of the two compared items are too close to each other. On the other hand, a metaphor such as *her eyes are typewriters* is not a good one either, as both elements share not enough common semantic features. Leech believes that in advertising language, it is the violation on the lexical and semantic level that makes metaphors an apt means to create an element of surprise and to suggest the right kind of emotive association with the product, establishing a symbolic identity between the literal and the figurative meaning. [17, 116] This element of surprise typical of figurative language functions as an important eye-catcher and has at the same time a high memorability quality.

Conclusions

Apart from metaphors, metonymy, synecdoche and personification are other frequently used stylistic devices in advertising language. Synecdoches (the name of a part of something is referred to the thing as a whole) often occur as visuals in ads, such as the dashboard instruments standing for the entire vehicle in car advertisements. Metonymy means referring to an item by referring to something related to it, as in "next door lives a Mercedes". Adverts frequently use metonymy where the product is associated with some person or surroundings, such as a car parked outside a fancy country club or a drink held in the hands of a beautiful woman. Again, the relation between the two things to be associated with each other is often expressed by visual means.

References

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