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AN ANALYSIS OF THE LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF BILLBOARD ADVERTISING IN NIGERIA

BY

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Abstract

This study seeks to analyze how advertising copywriters skillfully manipulate language to suit their purpose of communicating advertising messages. Billboard advertising is targeted at road users, and so contains very few familiar words. In this stylistic study, the research contends that language of advertising is not corrupt usage of language, but a deliberate attempt to deploy specialized expressions for the purposes of disseminating messages within the limited time and space available. Samples of advertisements were collected by purposive sampling technique from billboards found in the major cities in the South Eastern part of Nigeria. Analysis of data shows that advertising makes use of peculiar linguistic choices which are aimed at getting or retaining patronage of audience on advertised goods or services. It is recommended that language of advertising should not be seen as a model for learning any language. It is a field of study with special demands on language systems and should be regarded as such.

Introduction

Advertising is pervasive in all societies due to the duplication of goods, ideas and services, by different companies, industries establishments or individuals, especially in this era of technological advancement. Messages on the availability and desirability of these products and services are communicated to the target consumers through advertisements. Advertising, therefore, thrives when abundance begets competition. It is "the blood of an organization" or "a push that makes things happen" (Jefkin 1 and Norrish 71). It is the heartbeat of most successful businesses. Consequent upon this, most big multinational companies like Coca Cola, Amstel Malta, Apple, have invested huge sums of money in advertising to maintain their brand names and remain on top for several years. Other

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companies or industries that produce similar goods are not necessarily producing substandard goods, but simply have not spent the kind of money and time required to promote their own brand names.

Advertising is a specialized form of communication, the language in which it is transmitted notwithstanding. The major language of advertising in Nigeria is the English language. It is the second and official language of Nigeria used in journalism, sports commentaries, education, administration and others. In addition to this, Nigerian Pidgin, vernaculars, and other foreign languages like French, Chinese, German, and Arabic are used to transmit advertising messages to specialized audience.

It is worthy to note that advertising, just like other specialisms like law, medicine, banking, politics, has its own favoured linguistic expressions through which it reaches its target audience. In bill board advertising, copywriters know that their objective is to transmit messages to thousands of road users, many of them on the wheels. So they go for short smart messages which can be read at a glance. This pattern of choices imposed on the language results in the style of the language of advertising. Consider these:

Cussons Baby Gel *For a healthy happy start in life*

"For a healthy happy start in life" is not grammatically correct, but what matters to the advertiser is that the time and space available have been utilized to send across his message.

Millennium Enter-10-ment

Here, there is a deliberate deployment of a different writing system, the Rhebus Principle, to write "ten' so as to introduce the unusual. This kind of deviant spelling is acceptable in advertising, but not in other formal domains of language use. Some advertising messages, at first instance, create some kind of confusion in the mind of the audience. A good example of this is the famous IGNIS advertisement:

Your Wife is having an Affair.

This advert has to be read critically as interpreting it in its face value will definitely upset or confuse the reader.

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These peculiarities set the language of advertising apart from the language of other specialist areas as well as everyday language use. This paper argues that learners of different languages used in advertisements tend to take all written words, especially advertising message as models of correct usages. This naturally hampers their attainment of proficiency in those languages.

To this effect, the researcher sets out to analyze the linguistic features of language of advertising in Nigeria so as to give an insight into the specialized use of language in this field for better appreciation and comprehension. It will also highlight the need to scrutinize the pattern of choices they make when they use language. In the course of pursuing its objective, the research will provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What special choices do advertising make of language?
2. To what extent does the language of advertising deviate from the established rules of well-formedness in language
3. To what extent does the language of advertising use modifiers?
4. Does the language of advertising make use of appeals?

Advertising

Just like every aspect of social life, advertising takes place through the instrumentality of language. It is a kind of paid announcement disseminated through channels of communication and aimed at convincing target audience to react in a certain way towards the advertised goods, services or ideas.

There are many different types of advertising. They include:

Industrial Advertising: this type of advertising is directed to a consumer who happens to be an industry. This involves the advertisement of heavy machinery, raw materials and other goods used in manufacturing. For instance, engine manufacturers, manufacturers of marine hardware, boat builders, publishers of nautical charts, all advertise their products for the fishing industry.

Trade or Professional Advertising: Trade advertising is targeted at particular trade or profession. It is directed at specialists in the field of distribution: distributors, wholesalers,

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brokers, and retailers. Manufacturers use it to guide the middle men in the proper distribution of goods, hence it is informative.

Retail Advertising: The main objective of retail advertising is to achieve rapid turnover of goods. Its target is the consumers in and around the business area. Manufacturers and producers either bear the cost of advertising or provide some benefits for retailers for advertising their products. Retail advertising has contributed immensely to the growth and sustenance of newspapers, radio and television stations, because it is their major source of income.

Mail Order Advertising: This is aimed at inviting the consumer to place orders on products that will be mailed to them. It aids immediate sale of goods since manufacturers reach out to the consumers directly.

Institutional/Image or Corporate Advertising: This type of advertising is aimed at promoting the image of the institution or corporate entity. When this is done successfully, a good relationship is built between sellers/producers and buyers/consumers.

Municipal and State Advertising: This is used to promote specific areas as attractive to live or work in. It highlights those things that make such places attractive.

National Consumer Advertising: this is product advertising used by manufacturers to appeal directly to consumers. Its aim is to make consumers desirous of the products and services and subsequently buy it.

The principal media used for advertising include newspapers, magazines, electronic media, direct mail, miscellaneous, and outdoor advertising**.** Outdoor advertising can be conducted through the use of billboards, posters, inscriptions on vehicles among others.

Billboard Advertising

Billboard advertising has become a fast and convenient way to promote businesses in Nigeria and many other African countries. The reason is that a good percentage of the people is poor and can hardly access advertising messages in newspapers, magazines, radio, television and the internet. Advertisers are left with the option of outdoor advertising using

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billboards, posters, and inscriptions on vehicles and other flat surfaces. These advertising messages are targeted at road users who are expected to decode them at a glance. They are phrased in a smart and captivating manner. Elaborate persuasive advertising messages, therefore, are not suitable for billboard advertisements.

Methodology

Using purposeful selection as the sampling technique, many billboard advertising messages were collected from Enugu, Awka, Nnewi, Onitsha, Aba, Abakiliki, Umuahia and Owerri, representing the major cities in the South East Geopolitical Zone. Since the data captures advertisements on goods and services used nationwide, the findings can be generalized to other geopolitical zones of the federation. The research is a library research designed in such a way that the samples of advertisements collected are used to provide responses to the research questions raised above.

Analysis

1. What special choices does billboard advertising make of language? Language of advertising tends to have preference for short and jerky, but smart sentences. Such simple sentences ensure that advertising messages are passed across at a glance. Examples:

Dangote Cement

… for solid structures (S → NP + PP)

EmzorParacetamol

Pain must go! (S → NP + NP + VP)

Maltina

Cares in a special way (S → NP + V + PP)

Y' hello!

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MTN (S → NP + NP)

Dannic Hotel

A culture of service (S → NP + NP)

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The clear lager (S→NP + NP)

Kotec

When the brand is unusual (S→ NP + ADV Clause)

Joke's Impression

Where timeless beauty reflects (S→ NP +ADV Clause)

Unipetrol Nigeria Plc.

The dynamic force in petroleum marketing (S→NP +NP)

The sample messages above are cast in simple sentences with very simple structures for easy transmission. Phrase structure rules are deployed in the analysis above for economy.

Copywriters deploy different sentence types to achieve different effects. For instance, periodic sentences are used to create suspense. Periodic sentences raise curiosity in the readers as they want to know exactly what the advertisement is taking about. Examples:

Where two or more cares gather,

Peugeot Presides

ACB

When you cross new frontiers, you need a bank that knows the other side.

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Also, imperative sentences are used to give directives on the acceptable behaviour the advertiser demands from the audience. A famous example of the use of commands in advertisements the Legend stout's

Don't say cheers, say CONFAM

In addition to the choice of sentence types, the language of advertising deploys adjectives in their positive, comparative and superlative degrees to paint an attractive picture of the advertised goods and services. Such words enable advertising copywriters to build beauty, splendour and strength around what is advertised so as to arouse in the people the desire for them. Here are some examples of the use of positive statements:

Daravite

multivitamin

…makes you feel good, healthy and strong

Gulder

The ultimate beer

Chidex Express Garment

A big name in suit making

These advertisements are carefully worded to manipulate the minds of the target audience to believe that patronizing the advertised goods and services will make them partake of the good things the advertisements promise. You will not want to buy other brands of Multivitamin that have promised you nothing when Daravite promises to make you feel good, healthy and strong. Also, if Gulder is the ultimate in beer, there is no point going for other brands.

Advertising also makes use of superlatives to present the advertised goods and services as incomparable. Other brands of the products or providers of services are inferior to the advertised one. Examples

Royallux

The surest way to keep face and shoulder spotlessly clean and fresh

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Satzenbrau

The final word

Benson and Hedges

The best tobacco money can buy

In some advertisements, the copywriters strive to present the advertised thing in positive light without actually condemning other brands of the products. Examples:

Akira

Makes life better

Omo

Washes brighter and it shows

Life Vegetable Oil

…Always better for cooking

Flash

With longer life!

These advertisements are silent on what the advertised good are 'better than', 'brighter than', and longer than', thereby making the comparison vague.

Advertising copywriters also inject life into their messages by deploying figurative language. Figurative expressions tend to beautify language by making it appealing and evocative. Examples of the use of figurative expressions in advertising are:

First Bank

We are a safe Haven for your money

Your wife is having an affair

IGNIS

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Your wife's secret love

IGNIS

These are striking instances of metaphoric expressions. First Bank is likened to Heaven which is the safest place to keep things. This means that banking with the Bank is a safe venture. The metaphoric expressions in the IGNIS advertisements above are capable of alarming a husband who does not take time to match the pictures of the smiling lady in the advertisement with those of IGNIS home appliances. The kind of satisfaction that can be derived from using the appliances is likened to that got from a pleasurable love affair. The direct comparison used in these advertisements made them outstanding.

Zarina Medicated Soap

Kisses you all over.

Here, the effectiveness of Zarina Medicated Soap in caring for the body is personified by the word 'kisses'. Kissing is solely an attribute of human beings by which they show affection for one another

…UBA is globally rated as a leading bank in Nigeria, and indeed the world.

So come to UBA…

Rating UBA as a leading bank and not even one of the leading banks in the world is an instance of exaggeration. Exaggeration deliberately blows things out of proportion.

Coflin cough mixture clears your family's cough from deep deep down.

This advertisement shows an agreement of /c/ sounds 'coflin cough' 'clears' 'cough' and /d/ sound in 'deep deep down'. These are examples of alliteration deployed for the purposes of achieving some rhythmical effect. The advertisement also contains repetition in 'deep deep'. This is used for emphasis or to create emotional effects. Another example of repetition is

Chimaroke

Youset the ball rolling, keep it rolling.

Netmark

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Mosquitoes kill, kill mosquitoes

This Netmark advertisement is an example of antistrophe. Antistrophe is the repetition of items in a reverse order.

AIDS no dey show for face

Since AIDS is a deadly disease, one would normally expect an advertisement on it to epitomize the gravity of it. This is not so here. Rather, the advertisement disseminated in Pidgin is accompanied by a photograph of a handsome and happy young man. The deployment of this euphemistic expression is to make people understand that they cannot identify an AIDS carrier by his/her physical appearance. To make sure the message is delivered, the copywriter used Pidgin which is commoner among the youth and many less educated Nigerians.

Analysis conducted above shows that advertising copywriters make extensive use of items of language to package their messages in professionally acceptable language.

2. To what extent does the language of advertising deviate from the grammatical rules of language?

One of the characteristics of human language is that it is rule-governed. Every language has a limited set of rules which its users apply recursively to produce an unlimited number of novel sentences. Whenever the rules are violated ungrammatical sentences are produced. Advertising copywriters pay greater attention to reaching their audience than to constructing grammatical sentences. To achieve their aim of communicating messages that can be read at a glance, they deliberately violate the grammatical rules of the language of the advertisement. Examples:

Emzoron

…ideal for healthy family

Winco Foam

…foam for great value

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Limca

1st for thirst

Marble Arc Hotels

…A promise of pleasant surprise.

Chidex Express Garment

A big name in suit making

Aji-NO-Moto

…For better cooking always

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The clear lager

Maggi

The secret of good cooking

Venus

Fulfilling your dream of even toned skin

These are ideal advertising messages, but they are ungrammatical because some basic sentence elements are deliberately omitted, especially through the use of ellipsis.The verb is the only compulsory element of the sentence. A look at the advertising messages above shows an outright omission of articles and verbs resulting in grammatically deviant sentences. The grammatical versions of the messages above are:

Emzoron is ideal for a healthy family.

Winco Foam is the foam that has a great value.

Limca is the number one in thirst.

For the sentences to be grammatical they should all contain a verb. Though the use of 'foam for great value' in 2 is grammatical in English, 'foam that has a great value' is more

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acceptable in formal usage. The use of the Arabic numeral within English sentences is not an acceptable norm in writing, and 'for' is a Pidgin expression used to reach out to the majority of the populace who is not proficient in the English language. Others are:

Chidex Express Garment is a big name in the suit making industry.

Aji No-Moto is used for better cooking.

33 is the clear lager.

Maggi is the secret of good cooking.

Venus helps to fulfil your dream of even toned skin.

The expression, 'fulfilling your dream of even toned skin' is a dangling participial phrase, and have to be corrected to a more acceptable usage as found above.

Though errors above are deliberate, there are errors in advertisements that are committed as a result of incompetence in language. For instance, an advertising message of a company that owns water tankers reads

Topical waters

Since this excerpt is meant to advertise the water distributed by the tankers, water should not have been pluralized. Also, the term 'topical' is wrong in this context. Consider this also,

Agatha Salon

Has good feminine touch to your hair

(fixing weavon, weaving, ear piercing…)

'Has' in this advertisement does not collocate with 'to'. The verb that should have been there is 'adds'. Also, 'fixing weavons' should have been "fixing of weave-on'

The foregoing analysis shows that language of advertising permits conscious errors to be made, but some errors in advertising are committed due to poor knowledge of the language.

3. Does the language of advertising use modifiers?

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Advertising copywriters make extensive use of modifiers, mainly adjectives and adverbs, to paint vivid pictures of the advertised goods and services. Such pictures make the products and services advertised desirable. Here are examples of the use of adjectives and adjectival compound in advertising:

Escriva Paints

Customized paints

'Customized' as used in the advert paints the picture of a kind of paint made to satisfy the needs of customers. Consequently, the paint is worth buying.

Victoria Suites

A nice place to be

The hotel is described as a beautiful and enjoyable place to be.

Gulder

For solid enjoyment

The kind of enjoyment drinking Gulder gives is not an ordinary enjoyment, but a powerful one.

Total Super Air Refreshner

Gives you endless hours of unchecked fragrance

This means that the air refresher can make your house perpetually fresh.

Baygon

Special tropical immediate action and long-lasting effect

All these adjectives are geared towards describing Baygon as having rare qualities.

Adverbs also feature in advertising. Example:

Dangerous Bends Ahead

Drive carefully

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'Carefully' modifies 'drive'

The analysis above shows that modifiers enable advertising copywriters to paint the desired pictures of the goods or services advertised.

4. Does the language of advertising make use of appeals?

Advertising copywriters skillfully manipulate language in order to influence the behaviour of the audience towards what is advertised. When this is achieved, the audience goes on to patronize it. Examples of the use of appeal in advertising include:

Don't gamble with the life of your appliance

Protect them with MARS Stabilizer

Sunsilk

Be yourself, be beautiful

Delta soap

Be clean, be protected, be happy

The very nature of these advertisements make them very effective. The first one begins with a warning and ends with an imperative sentence which is targeted at appealing to the reasoning of the audience to prolong the life of their appliances with MARS Stabilizer. The last two advertisements also use imperative sentences to appeal to audience's reasoning.

Findings and Conclusion

The analysis conducted above shows that certain word formations are peculiar to the language of advertising because the goal of the profession is to send advertising messages across in the shortest time and space available. Since time and space are of much importance in billboard advertising, it uses a lot of short and jerky sentences, positive, comparative and superlative degrees, figurative expressions; modifiers, appeals and deviant structures to create beauty and effectiveness around the advertised products or services. As a specialist area, advertising has its own specialized language. It tends to have unique word choice and

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syntactic structures which enable the copywriters to capture the attention of the audience within seconds. Language of advertising, therefore, should not be seen by language learners as a model for correct and acceptable usage of language. It is marred with some peculiarities of the field of advertising. Meanwhile, where deviation from the rules of language leads to confusion, grammaticality should be upheld. Advertisements targeted at rural dwellers and illiterates should be disseminated in local languages and supported by visuals which can give clues to the meaning of the messages.

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