



## LINGUISTIC PATTERNS IN ADVERTISING MESSAGES

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### **Abstract**

*This paper aims to identify the most recurrent linguistic devices used in advertising texts. As previous research has established that language use shapes and determines consumer behavior, its importance in any advertising message is unquestionable. Therefore, we propose to find out the most widely used linguistic patterns, grammatical structures, and occurrence of certain linguistic features by investigating a corpus of advertising messages selected from print and online media.*

### **Key words:**

Linguistic feature, advertising, language, creativity, ads

### **1. Introduction**

Along with the fast development of communication channels at global level, the advertising sector has also experienced a significant growth. Due to the electronic environment the diffusion means have diversified, enabling advertisers to target international audiences in fast and cost-effective ways. Therefore, the advertising industry has undergone a lot of changes in order to keep in line with the technological development and meet contemporary expectations. The advertising message has evolved hand in hand with all scientific improvements during the last decades. The advertising message is a mixture of amazing and impressive visuals, audio and written text. If in the past ads contained a lot of text and very few images, nowadays the text is kept to the minimum while the visual and audio features are predominant. However, a lot of attention is paid to the text that accompanies any advertising message, and advertisers make use of various linguistic devices to draw attention and convey a strong message to the target audience. The choice of language is decisive in obtaining the desired output, and close attention is required especially when the message is directed at a global audience. Specialists in the field take account of linguistic means and evaluate the language used in order to maximize the effect of their message. Studies have been conducted to determine how language works in the advertising discourse, what linguistic devices are used and how advertising language has evolved in the course of time.

Researchers have analyzed the language used in marketing communications and determined that subtle wording changes may affect consumer behavior and shape buying habits. Some of the studies on the

language of advertising were conducted by Leech, G., in "English in Advertising" (1966), work that lays the foundation for the future exploration of the advertising language, Bolinger, D., in "Language: The Loaded Weapon" (1980), Hughes, G., in "Words in Time" (1987), Cook, G., in "Discourse of Advertising" (1992), Piller, I., in "Englische Werbeslogans" (1997), Goddard, A., in "The Language of Advertising" (1998), Gieszinger, S., in "The History of Advertising Language" (2001). The aforementioned studies debate about the main characteristics of the advertising language, from different points of view while emphasizing some particular aspects or types of advertising messages. Leech has called the language of advertising "loaded language", as it aims to influence and change the will, opinions, and attitude of its recipients. He contends that advertising language differs from other types of loaded language, such as political discourse, journalism or religious discourse, because it bears a very precise material aim, that of changing the mental disposition to reach the desired outcome, namely to buy a certain kind of product or service. Moreover, Leech has identified four major functions of a successful advertisement that influence the choice of language in order to achieve these aims: attention value, readability, memorability, and selling power. Ads aim to catch attention and arouse curiosity, and linguistically this can be achieved by breaking the conventions of the language use, and making use of wrong spelling, neologisms, puns, rhymes, semantic deviations, etc. Once the advertising message has drawn the receiver's attention, this interest has to be sustained. Thus, the language used in advertisements tends to be simple, informal and mostly colloquial, using familiar

vocabulary. The practice of using informal language associated with private contexts in public or business communication was called by Leech "public colloquialism" (Leech, 1966, 123). As for enhancing memorability, repetition is the most frequent technique used: semantic, lexical and syntactic repetition, alliteration, rhythm, rhyme, or grammatical parallelism. The ultimate goal of the advertising message is to sell. Inducing the desired kind of action is best achieved by means of imperatives, which are considered the most frequently used syntactic forms in advertising language (Leech, 1996, 141).

## 2. Methodology of research

Our approach is based on the fact that words and the way they are used influence and determine certain attitudes and perceptions. It has been proved that words choice reflects the speaker's thoughts and feelings: "Our findings to date suggest that the words we use in natural language reflect our thoughts and feelings in often unpredictable ways. They also reveal a tremendous amount of information about our social interactions and personality. Function words, in particular, carry an array of psychological meanings and set the tone for social interactions" (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007, 13). Thus, language use is not a random practice but rather a studied and carefully planned activity, especially in advertising messages.

Considering the extensive literature in the field, we decided to gather a corpus of advertisements selected from print and online media and analyze them from lexical and syntactic point of view in order to determine if our results are consistent with the current findings regarding advertising language patterns, and also look for any possible dissimilarities.

A content analysis was carried out by means of a text analysis software program, called Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC). We have used the LIWC software to find out the rate of self-references, social words, positive emotions, negative emotions, overall cognitive words, articles and big words used across the advertising messages we selected in our sample.

LIWC is a text analysis software program designed by James W. Pennebaker, Roger J. Booth, and Martha E. Francis. It calculates the degree to which different categories of words are used, and can determine the degree any text uses positive or negative emotions, self-references, causal words, and 70 other language dimensions. "LIWC is a transparent text analysis program that counts words in psychologically meaningful categories. Empirical results using LIWC demonstrate its ability to detect meaning in a wide variety of experimental settings, including to show attentional focus, emotionality, social relationships,

thinking styles, and individual differences" (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010, 24).

## 3. Results

First of all, the analysis of our sample data revealed a high rate of positive emotion words while negative emotion words got a very low score. The high score for positive emotion terms goes far beyond the value set for personal texts, while the level of negative emotions is above the range set for formal texts (see Figure 1). This finding is in line with previous research according to which advertising texts make excessive use of positive words. Ads tend to convey positive images and give the target audience a positive attitude. Prohibition and negative forms are generally avoided.

The low level of overall cognitive terms, associated with a high use of positive emotions, may be related to the fact that ads are meant to allure the audience, to induce a certain perception and attitude, and they make appeal most to receiver's feelings than thinking.

We also noticed an extremely low score for self-reference terms (I, me, my), when compared to the values for both formal and personal texts provided by LIWC. The lack of self-references in our corpus was compensated by an obvious preference for the pronouns 'we' and 'you'. On the use of the singular personal pronoun, Chung & Pennebaker assert: "At its most basic level, the use of the word "I" suggests that the speaker is briefly paying attention to the self. Too much attention to the self is associated with highly negative emotional states [...]" (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007, 10). Therefore, the low level of self-reference terms is meant to turn the attention to the receiver of the message, enhance his importance, and involve him in the action.

The use of the personal pronouns 'you' and 'we' is meant to make the message sound warm and affable, narrow the gap between the sender and the receiver, and make the audience perceive the message as being designed to help and care for them. The advertiser acts as his main concern would be to ensure the consumer's comfort and leisure, help him make the best choice always in his interest.

The lack of negative emotion words (0.61) displayed in our sample data is characteristic of advertising texts, whose main function is to promote a positive image and persuade the audience to buy a certain kind of product.

The values for articles and big words were higher than we expected. Bearing in mind that advertising messages are closer to personal texts as structure and style, we anticipated a lower level of articles and big words. On the contrary, the degree of articles use

exceeded even the measures set for formal texts, and the value for big words was set between personal and formal texts.

Key linguistic features - LIWC  
 (values per 3,944 words)

LIWC dimension	Your data	Personal texts	Formal texts
Self-references (I, me, my)	1.09	11.4	4.2
Social words	7.48	9.5	8.0
Positive emotions	4.36	2.7	2.6
Negative emotions	0.61	2.6	1.6
Overall cognitive words	3.45	7.8	5.4
Articles (a, an, the)	9.28	5.0	7.2
Big words (> 6 letters)	16.68	13.1	19.6

Figure 1

Furthermore, the analysis of our sample data revealed the predominance of monosyllabic verbs. The use of short verbs renders the message more familiar, easily understood and remembered. We noticed the predominant use of the verb 'get' instead of 'buy', and a high use of modal verbs. The word 'buy' is rarely used in advertisements, as it involves the action of obtaining something by paying money for it. Therefore, the verb 'buy' is generally replaced by other verbs with the meaning of obtaining something but without involving the purchase itself. The advertising text doesn't tell the audience to buy the product, instead it announces that when you get the product you feel much better, you enjoy or win something of great value.

Of all the short verbs in our sample, the most often used were those involving a certain kind of action: 'Just do it!', 'Be all that you can be!', 'Make it real!', 'Make the most of now', 'Yes, you can', 'You got it!', 'Drive it!', 'Land Rover. Go beyond', 'Drive your dreams', 'Subaru. Think. Feel Drive.', 'Get a Mac', 'Enjoy life', 'Live the pleasure!', 'Add a new Mac to your Mac', 'Get the feeling', 'Ford. Feel the difference'. The high frequency of verbs like 'get', 'be', 'go', 'can', 'make', 'have', 'think', 'come', 'feel', 'should' etc. is a direct appeal to the audience, and also renders the message more persuasive. (Figure 2) It also engenders a feature of familiarity, a direct and informal style characteristic of advertising messages. Informal styles involve a relaxed social relationship between the sender and the addressee, the language shows many features of spoken communication, and implies the use of informal terms, direct address to the recipient, and casual expressions. The following graphic presents the distribution of short verbs across our corpus.

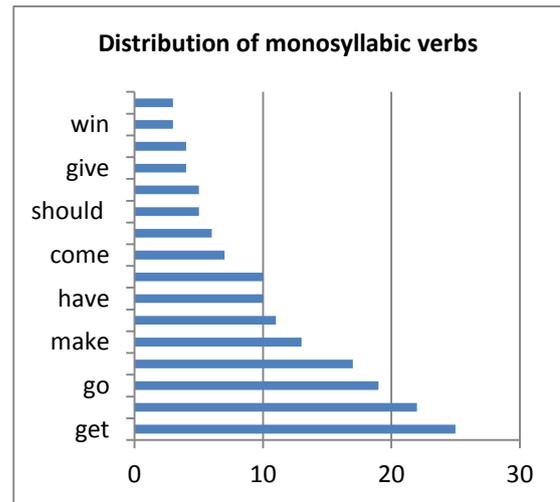


Figure 2

The goal of the advertising message is to present the qualities of a product or service. This accounts for the high frequency of favorable words, positive modifiers, especially favorable adjectives used in ads. Positive adjectives confirm the attractive qualities of the advertised product and promote an affirmative attitude towards it. Our sample revealed a high level of adjectives, especially of comparative and superlative degrees. Advertising texts make use of comparative and superlative degrees to indicate the first-rate quality of the product or service advertised. When the comparative degree is being used, there is no mention of a certain product to which the advertised product is compared, but just the information that the product is 'better', 'more powerful', 'faster', etc., without mentioning the less competitive choice. The use of the superlative degree gives the feeling that the advertised service or product is considered state-of-the-art, equipped with the latest technology, the best of its kind without doubt.

Short adjectives were more frequent in our corpus and the use of comparatives exceeded superlatives: 'We try harder', 'Expect more, pay less', 'Driest gin in town', 'The closest thing to home', 'More power', 'Faster now', 'Less is more', 'An even quicker study', 'Higher Resolution. Better Mileage', 'The fastest, most powerful iPhone yet', 'Thinner. Lighter. Faster', 'The biggest breakthrough since point and click', 'The easiest way to build powerful web services', etc.

The most frequent adjective used in our sample was 'good', with its comparative and superlative forms: 'The best friend thirst ever had', 'Let's make things better', 'Better graphics', 'Live better', 'Better than ever', 'The world's best selling personal computer', 'The best built cars in the world', 'The best Windows app ever', 'Your iPhone gets better with every new app', 'Save money. Live better'. The following graphic presents the

distribution of degrees of comparison across our sample data:

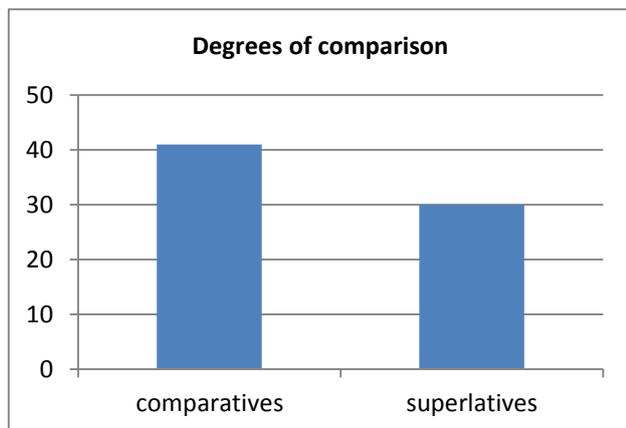


Figure 3

Regarding the syntactic features, we noticed the tendency to cut up sentences, remove finite verbs with non-finite forms in order to make the text more dynamic. The use of smaller units is meant to better underline the content of the advertising message and easily catch the attention of the target audience. Sentence length is also an important feature regarding the readability of a text. Short and simple sentences increase the degree of readability, and are by far preferred in advertising texts.

Last but not least, the prevalent use of imperative sentences we determined in our corpus suggests the advertiser's intention to call for action. Imperative sentences are used as mild commands to get the desired results, to influence and persuade the receiver to take action and ultimately buy the product.

#### 4. Conclusions

Our findings are consistent with previous research in the field which describes advertising messages as being characterized by an informal style, mostly colloquial, where even written language reveals many features of spoken language. The analysis of our sample data revealed a prevalent use of short verbs, imperative sentences, comparative and superlative degrees of comparison, plenty of positive terms, and personal pronouns that focus on the recipient of the message.

The only dissimilarity we noticed in our sample was the use of articles and big words to a greater extent than expected in an advertising text, which is supposed to be closer to an informal, more colloquial style according to prior research. (Leech, 1996)

Creativity and variation stand for a characteristic trait of the advertising text. Advertising language aims to change styles, break conventions, produce unexpected elements of surprise to attract attention and shape consumer buying habit.

All in all, bearing in mind the predominant persuasive function of the advertising message, certain typical linguistic features can be considered as characteristic of the language of advertising, as they best serve the goal of attracting attention and influencing the audience. Even if there may appear certain variations and deviations from the typical norms of an advertising message, the main linguistic features established by systematic studies remain the same.

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