

Pragmatics and advertising

Advertisers occupy the spaces where we are typically attending to other things – watching television, reading or browsing a magazine on the way to work, looking at posters on an underground train, platform or escalator, or from a car, bus or bicycle. They will try to appeal to all our senses and different language processing faculties at the same time. It is quite common for a TV advertisement to feature any or all of these at the same time: **musical track, sound FX, voiceover, dialogue spoken by character or celebrity in or out of role, static text, moving text or text spelling out letter by letter on screen**, with or without extra graphic embellishment.

What we do, if anything with these, may vary from person to person – but is something one can research. You can do this, for example, by showing advertisements to people (categorizing the people by whether they have seen the advertisement before, and how often, as well as by other things like sex and age), then asking them whether they think the advert contains an example of each of the kinds of text that the researcher has identified. (It is possible to add some that are not there, as distractor questions, to eliminate some kinds of respondent.)

A very good pragmatic approach is to consider the position and viewpoint that the audience is being asked to adopt. This can be something very simple, as in an assumption that we all want to save money. This assumption is very widespread among advertisers and marketers. Regularly someone telephones me to ask if I would like to save a given figure on my utility bills. My stock response is to say that I do not wish to save this amount (or even a lot more) to change something with which I am currently content, thinking it a fair price for a reliable service. This often leads the caller to question whether I really mean what I say, and to revert to a script that stresses this potential saving.

By no means all advertisements make this assumption. Others assume that the reader or listener has **anxieties** about his or her self-image, and that he or she can become more attractive by wearing the watch or clothes advertised, or driving a different car. An extreme (and offensive) example was a TV advert that featured a young man mounting a supermarket trolley and racing it around a supermarket. A female voiceover spoke the phrase: “Inadequate car”. (The advert is offensive in suggesting that the choice or ownership of a marque of car is the measure of a human being.) Various advertisers of mobile phones try to persuade existing owners that they need to replace a model that is not stylish and a likely cause of ridicule, as in an advertisement series (shown on UK television) for Phones4U. In these adverts the comedian Paul Merton speaks a voiceover: “We’ll find the right phone for you”. Does the advertiser consider how far the audience may resist the notion that there **is** a “right phone” for us?

A more objective approach to pragmatics might be to consider what **grammatical person or form of address** advertisers use, if they try to speak directly to us. Do they use **imperatives** (“Look at the clues”), do they make **statements** (“We don’t serve lobster in the directors’ dining room”) or do they plant **noun-phrases** (“Free servicing for 3 years”) and leave us to work out what to do about these?

Discourse structures in advertising

Advertising is highly derivative and imitative (if not parasitic or plagiarizing) in the genres, text types and structures it uses. In effect, any kind of text that exists for any other purpose may be the blueprint for an advertisement. (This is not a one-way relationship: dramatic narratives and comic animations often borrow structures and techniques that first appeared in advertising. And there are many examples of television or print fiction that started life as advertisements – the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* in the 1990s or *Torchie the Battery Boy* in the 1960s.)

A very common general approach (for any broadcast medium and cinema) is to create **narratives** – which may be **self-contained** or **episodic**. While the advertiser may not wish to point out that these are narratives, this is not always the case. A series of advertisements for the BMW Mini car uses the format of stories with a plot consisting of three or four statements, read as voiceover with accompanying action – the subject of each sentence is usually “New Mini”, and each example ends with: “The end. It’s a Mini adventure”. At the opposite extreme would be a series of advertisements produced by the agency McCann Erickson for Nescafé’s *Gold Blend* brand of instant coffee. This campaign ran from November 1987 to 1993, containing twelve episodes released at the rate of one or two a year. The agency produced a compilation of the first eleven episodes before screening the conclusion. The “story” was adapted as a romantic novel, entitled *Love Over Gold*. An even longer-running series featured the OXO couple “Katie” and “Philip”, in a series of domestic scenes. The *Gold Blend* series may have prompted the advertisers of the Renault Clio to make a series of advertisements featuring a French father and daughter (“Papa” and “Nicole”) into a more coherent narrative, ending with a wedding, which sends up the classic film *The Graduate*. In this advertisement, two entertainers, then at the height of their popularity (Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer) played the jilted groom and the successful old flame who runs off with the girl. A Channel 4 poll showed this series to be the most popular of all UK TV adverts, while other studies have claimed that the series was the most successful in terms of the audience’s ability to identify the product advertised.

As styles of TV broadcast have developed (say lifestyle programmes or reality shows), so advertisements have moved to emulate them. So we see the home makeover and DIY show mirrored by advertisements for Homebase, in which Neil Morrissey and Lesley Ash appear as a couple (loosely resembling the characters in *Men Behaving Badly*) while post-watershed documentaries about sexual behaviour clearly have inspired the campaign (starting in 2002) for Pot Noodle (“It’s dirty but you want it”) in which a young man visits various clubs and asks young women in underwear or bondage gear whether they “do” Pot Noodle, or in which a young woman (seemingly a girlfriend) accuses the young man of indulging in his Pot Noodle habit.

Task: Make your own collection of advertising texts. Use the descriptions above to make tables or charts for recording various language features. See if any general patterns emerge.

Finding more

You can find many advertisements by going to the Web sites of the various agencies, or looking for named directors of commercials. But two big portals worth visiting are:

- <http://www.adflip.com> – *Adflip* claims to be the world’s biggest archive of advertising
- <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/adaccess> – *Ad*access* is a vast historical archive of adverts.

As a critique of advertising, you should look at *Adbusters*, especially the spoof advertisements section at

- <http://adbusters.org/creativeresistance/spoofads>