

Linguistic Analysis of Advertising Communication: Grammatical & Lexical Deviations

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This paper aims to study the linguistic aspect of the language of advertising from the view point of grammatical and lexical deviations.

Advertising is one of the most interesting and important areas of language use in our times. Whether we admit it or not, it has seeped into the very texture of our society having indelibly woven into our lives and identities. Autumnal in being, it marks the exit of the old while ringing in the arrival of the new. In fact, it has become a communication tool which influences our attitudes towards products, companies, brand names, life styles and public issues. Cohen observes that “Advertising helps to determine which styles are fashionable, which resorts are ‘in’, what music we hear, which public figures are our next folk heroes”¹.

“Grammatical deviance”, says Enkvist, “involves tinkering with the normal system of rules. This tinkering can be explained in terms of rule omission or suspension, rule change, or rule addition.”¹ Modern advertising makes very liberal use of disjunctive grammar in which minor and non-finite clauses are independent. Sentences very often do not have finite predicators, and usually consist of only nominal or adverbial groups, which may consist of only one word. Geoffrey Leech says that “Disjunctive language is primarily associated with headlines, subheads and signature.”² A headline must be immediately comprehensible and directly moving. “At the same time it must possess all the succinctness of an epigram,”³ says Weir. A headline, therefore, highlights the essence of its message and leaves items of low information value unexpressed. A few examples of headlines with disjunctive grammar are given below.

- e.g. The complete name in Fashion shoes–Bata.
- e.g. Raymond - The complete Man

In the subheads, disjunctive grammar is much more infrequently employed. For example, Halo Egg Shampoo’s headline: ‘Put beautiful body and bounce in your hair’ is continued in the subhead: ‘With super-conditioning protein-rich Halo Egg Shampoo’. The disjunctive grammar has a prominent role to play in the body-copy of today’s advertisements. Almost all advertisements make use of it in the main text of their messages. The Versa advertisement claims in the headlines to have ‘redefined luxurious travel’, and invites the consumer to ‘sink in, stretch out, lie back, indulge’, by ‘a turn of the key’, ‘in gear’ and ‘foot to pedal’, thus highlighting all the attractive qualities of the car in nominal groups meant to appeal to the male reader. Anne French Hair Remover tells the reader why the use of the cream is preferable to shaving:

No cuts. No quick stubble. No razor shadow.

Similarly, signature lines and catchy slogans, almost invariably have disjunctive grammar. A slogan is “a catchy sentence or phrase which is easy to remember”⁴. It creates an impact of repetition. A slogan is kept in constant use at least for one campaign over a period of time. Slogans may use an appeal, or a pleasant description of the product quality, can be charged with emotions and become psychological-movers. Good slogans are idea-centred, rather than word-centred. Writing slogans is a challenging and creative task.

- e.g. Tata Indica, - More Car, Per Car.
- e.g. Ford Icon – The Josh Machine.
- e.g. Utterly, butterly delicious-Amul Butter.
- e.g. Connecting People – Nokia Cellphones.
- e.g. Peter England – The Honest shirt.

Lexical Deviation

Lexical deviations constitute one of the most important sources for the creative copywriter. He can have recourse to functional conversion, or he can introduce neologisms, or else he can make use of anomalous lexical collocation to satisfy his need to express himself imaginatively.

(1) Functional Conversion: Geoffrey Leech, describing functional conversion as 'Zero affixation', defines it as : "Functional conversion consists in adopting an item to a new grammatical function."⁵ Since the order of words in a sentence is more or less fixed, functional shifts within the sentence do not endanger intelligibility greatly. When one part of speech operates as another part of speech, the language acquires fresh vitality and variety and this is exactly what the copywriter strives for.

The conversion of nouns into verbs which become very common in the general use of English is fairly frequent in advertising language. 'DCM textiles have chaotic symmetry that SCREWBALL the eye'. 'Screwball' used colloquially in the US, both as a noun and as an adjective, means 'a crazy person'. Here, it implies that the eye will become crazy with the sight of the 'chaotic symmetries'. "Plug in to the future", says a BPL advertisement, converting a noun into a verb. Similarly, the conversion of an adjective into a verb is also used by the copywriters:

e.g. Ribbed for extra pleasure. Color Plus Corduroys.

The use of pronouns in positions where only nouns normally operate, i.e., following pre-modifying adjectives, is now coming into vogue in advertising English:

e.g. Technology that understands you - LG.

e.g. For a more Beautiful You - Lakme.

e.g. For an ultra Modern You - Ponds.

In the vocabulary of advertising, the word class which has pride of place is the adjective. The copywriter finds that most of the adjectives in general use have been squeezed of their semantic value. He therefore, has to take recourse to new epithets out of his imagination. They are often multiple-hyphenated adjectival groups which are placed before headwords to form new expressive single pre-modifiers. Often, adjectival clauses which would normally be introduced by a relative pronoun, 'who', 'whom', or 'that' are placed immediately before nouns. An advertisement for Gold Spot (soft drinks) says: 'come-and-get-it.'

Nouns and pronouns denoting time often become adjectives in the hands of the imaginative copywriter. For instance, the advertisement for Bata shoes claims to be, 'Styled and cut to fit the TODAY image', One headline in Limca advertisement has 'Love at THIRST sight', followed by the subhead, 'Limca lovers start young'. Here, the noun 'thirst' is employed as numerical adjective.

(ii) Neologisms: Neologisms form the largest part of linguistic creativity with the help of lexical violations. The privilege of coining new words is shared equally by copywriters and poets. Coinages like 'two-in-one; 'all-in-one,' 'ready-to-cook,' and 'wrinkle-free' (Arvind Mills) are so popular in general usage that they may be called neologisms.

For compound heads, the most popular formation is the combination of two nouns: eg. 'pace-setters', 'trend-setters', 'silk-power', 'woman-power', 'crease-resistance', 'night-cream', etc. Brand names consisting of noun + noun compounds together make up the trade name. Extremely used in advertising English is affixation. 'Affixation' means the adding of a prefix or suffix to an existing word to form a new word. The Latin prefix 'ultra' – seems to be a special favourite of the cosmetics-copywriter and the detergent-copywriter. The prefix 'extra' is also being used extensively by copywriters these days.

e.g. Lakme's Ultra-glow and Ultra – frost

e.g. Lip Colours guaranteed to make an Ultra exciting you.

e.g. Gala-Ultra-thin nail polish remover.

e.g. Surf – Ultra.

e.g. Extra Light. Extra Sharp. Shirts & Trousers from Allen Solly.

Among adjective derivatives found only in advertising language the – y forms are the most numerous: ‘cheesy’, ‘lemoni’, ‘snazzy’, ‘scooty’, etc.

(iii) Anomalous Lexical Collocation :

The copywriter, in search of a striking new adjective or noun, often uses anomalous lexical collocation. The deviation consists in an unrestricted choice of nouns where only a noun from a limited list of nouns is normally used. The deviant occurrence is in contrast to the expected occurrence. For example, an advertisement for Flexible containers claims them to have ‘shelf-appeal’ (on the analogy of ‘sex-appeal’). Similarly, an HMT watches advertisement has in the headline that an HMT beauty is never ‘dial-deep’ (on the analogy of ‘skin-deep’).

By laying bare the linguistic network of the language of advertising i.e. the grammatical and lexical deviations an attempt has been made to evoke a general design of advertising writing. Different levels of language viz., the phonological, graphological, lexical, phrasal, clausal and of the sentence are objectively observed. The creative arena of the advertising language is also peeped into. A generalized account of all the specialized features is presented in order to evolve a systematized description of advertising English. The next chapter purports to analyse and assess the effectiveness of some of the linguistic devices used in advertisements by way of conducting a field survey through questionnaire and personal interview, and presents the findings thereof.

References

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