

Presuppositions in Strategies of Conveying New Information in Print Advertising Language

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the possible functions of presupposition in print advertising language to find out the positive roles played by presupposition in helping advertising achieve its persuasion goal. Fifteen advertisements, culled from English newspapers and magazines, are analyzed to examine the roles that presupposition plays in strategies of conveying new information in print advertising language. This study might be significant in providing certain possible theoretical guidance to the print advertising practitioners to design successful advertising texts.

Key Words: Presupposition; conveying new information; advertising language.

1. Introduction

The communication between advertiser and reader can well be regarded as an implicit conversation, which occurs the moment a reader casts a glance at an advertisement. In communication, a speaker usually conveys new information on the basis of old or given information to hearers, and the pragmatic presupposition is part of the old information. On the basis of the presupposition, the advertiser can communicate his new information, usually the information about the advertised products or services, to potential consumers. Meanwhile, in order to attract and impress the consumers, presupposition is also frequently employed as an effective means to highlight some important information (or focused information). This paper will explore the positive functions of the presupposition in the communication strategy of print advertising language.

2. A Model of Communication

Communication involves an exchange of information against the background of the cognitive structure of knowledge (Engelkamp, Zimmer, 1983, p.31). It relates to factual knowledge as well as general knowledge. Factual knowledge refers to entities, of which it is assumed that they actually exist in the outside world as individual people, objects, or events, whereas general knowledge is assumed to refer to classes of potential referents (ibid. 11). Part of such knowledge is common to both speaker and hearer, and is thus called shared knowledge or mutual knowledge. Another part of knowledge is personal knowledge, available only to one of the participants in the communication.

The process of communication also involves another two concepts: given knowledge and new knowledge. Pragmatic presupposition is the assumption of the speaker in relation to the knowledge of the hearer. It constitutes at any given time the communicative background assumed to be known and accepted. Therefore, the pragmatic presupposition is nothing other than the given information which one infers from communication, a message precondition for the processing of any communication.

The speaker and the hearer give and receive information reciprocally. On the basis of mutual knowledge, the communication is expanded with personal knowledge. Before the speaker gives new information to the hearer from his personal knowledge, he assesses whether the given information is known to the hearer. The new information is usually connected with given information, and this given information is represented in the mutual knowledge. On the basis of mutual knowledge, the new information, or personal knowledge is easily communicated to the hearer.

3. *New Information and Given Information*

In communicating advertising information, the given information usually refers to the information that the advertisers believe to be known by the recipients either because it is physically present in the context or because it has already been mentioned in the texts. The new information refers to the information that the advertisers believe to be unknown by the recipients and that they intend to convey most. New information should attract the attention and thus receive focus in the advertisements.

Example 1

It's not your hand bag. It's not your neighborhood. It's not your boyfriend. It's your watch that tells most about who you are. (Seiko Watch, from *People*)

>> X tells most about who you are.

X is your watch.

It is generally held that where one lives, what kind of people s/he makes friends with and what brand of hand bags s/he carries can be the symbols of her/his social status. This is the given information, or mutual knowledge, involved in this advertisement. However, the advertiser negates this part of old information, but adds new information on the basis of the given with a cleft structure that implies that "only Seiko watch can tell one's status." With this tricky language device, this piece gives some impressive new information that "If you want to show your social status, you should wear Seiko watch".

In a cleft sentence, the speaker expresses the fact that it is Y who does something, or to whom something happens. The information in the relative clause is assumed to be known (Engelkamp, Zimmer, 1983, p.60). "It's your watch" contains the relationally new information, while the relative clause "that tells most about who you are" the relationally given information.

Example 2

No cables. No computers.

All you connect with are your pictures (Kodak Easy share Printer, from *People*).

>> You connect X.

X is your pictures.

It is known that if people want to print their digital photos out, they must connect the cameras with cable, computer and printer—this is a real complicated task. But with Kodak Easy share Printer, things become much easier: all people should do is connecting the camera with the printer directly. On the basis of the shared information, the advertiser imparts new information with a subjective clause that emphasizes the convenience of using the advertised printer. In the designing of advertising texts, the subjective clause is often employed to convey new information to their recipients, for example, "What you need is..." and "All you want is..."

Both new and given information are important in an advertisement. If there is only new information, an advertisement will be obscure or incomprehensible. If there is only given information, it will be tasteless or meaningless. As the mutual knowledge or given information, presupposition plays an important role in communicative events.

4. *Presupposition and Focused Information*

In communication, people employ one way or another to emphasize the most important part of the information, which is known as information focus or information center. In general, new information attracts the attention of the hearer and thus causes the new information to be focused (Engelkamp, Zimmer, 1983, p.24). According to the Communication Model, given information should be expanded by new information; Halliday (2001, p.116, 325-326) also suggests that the speaker will order given information before new information. As focused information, new information is generally arranged after given information and is put at the end of an utterance:

Example 3

Sweep away those stuffy odors in your closet and love your jeans and tee shirts incredibly fresh with Febreze® (Febreze®, from *People*).

>> Your closet has those stuffy odors.

Here the advertiser presupposes that “your closet has stuffy odors”, which is the given information, while “you can sweep away them with Febreze” is the new information and the information focus falls on the last lexical item of the utterance – “Febreze”.

In order to give a good and deep impression, the advertisers often highlight or emphasize certain components or information by adjusting the position of information focus. Sometimes they make the information centers fall on the other lexical items rather than the last one in an utterance:

Example 4

Only Ericsson lets you grow your network anyway you want (Ericsson Telecommunication, from *Forbes*).

>> X lets you grow your network any way you want.

X is Ericsson.

In Example 4, the advertiser puts the most important information “Ericsson” at the beginning of the utterance. This advertisement presupposes that “something lets you grow your network anyway you want”, the new information is that “Ericsson does,” and “only Ericsson does”, so the information center shifts to the brand name of the advertised product. With the word “only”, the information focus becomes impressively prominent.

Presupposition keeps a close relationship with the information focus. The change of presupposition information determines the change of information focus. Therefore, one common method to mark the information focus is to alter the position of presupposition information by certain means, such as lexical and syntactical means and other language devices.

4.1 Lexical Means

Levinson has it that “certain particles like only, even, just are presupposition-triggers.” (1983, p.185) Employing such words, advertisers can change the positions and contents of presuppositions, and hence mark the information focuses.

Example 5

Only AVEENO® has an exclusive soy complex proven to naturally soften and even tone. (Aveeno Positively Radiant Daily Moisturizer, from *People*).

>> X has an exclusive soy complex proven to naturally soften and even tone.

X is AVEENO®.

Example 6

Only BAND-AID® FOUGH-STRIPS™ has a rugged fabric exterior and Super-Stick adhesive for heavy duty protection that keeps out dirt and germs all day (BAND-AID® Johnson-Johnson, from *People*).

>> X has a rugged fabric exterior and Super-Stick adhesive for heavy duty protection that keeps out dirt and germs all day.

X is BAND-AID® FOUGH-STRIPS™.

In these two examples, “only” is put in front of the brand names of the advertised products. The brand names thus become the information focuses. If “only” were absent, the information focuses would be less prominent.

This is also true of “even”:

Example 7

Febreze® sweeps away odors. It **even** gets the funk out of the funky sports gear so your things are surprisingly, delightfully fresh-air clean (Febreze®, from *Economist*).

>> Air cleaner can eliminate unpleasant odors, but here Febreze® cannot only sweep away these odors, but also get the funk out of funky sports gear. The word “even” makes “gets” more prominent and emphasizes the unique function of the advertised product.

Another important presupposition-trigger is “just”. Like “only” and “even”, “just” can also emphasize the lexical items that followed it, for example:

Example 8

Cookies™ & M & M's® is a crunchy cookie topped with **just** the right amount of your favorite candy (Cookies™ & M&M's®, from *People*).

>> Cookies™ & M&M's® has X of your favorite candy.

X is the right amount.

Example 9

Just the idea of it intrigued her. “This is going to be fun”, she whispered to herself (Revlon Lipstick, from *People*).

>> X intrigued her.

X is the idea of it.

In these examples, the word “just” emphasizes the lexical items followed it, hence “the right amount” and “the idea of it” become focused information in the advertisements, and these two items make the unique advantages and features of the advertised products more impressive and prominent.

In the above analysis, we have examined three useful particles “only”, “even” and “just”, which emphasize the lexical items followed and make them the information focuses. Usually, “only” is put before the brand name of the product to demonstrate the unique function so fit; the word “even” is often used in other position so fan advertisement except before the brand name; while the use of “just” is more flexible, it can be put before the lexical items which the advertisers intend to put stress on. The appropriate position of “only”, “even” and “just” in utterances can be concluded as follows:

- (1) Only X can do something.
- (2) X can do even something.
- (3) X can even do something.
- (4) Just X can do something.
- (5) X can just do something.
- (6) X can do just something.

With the appropriate employment of the above words, the advertisers can emphasize different information focuses they intend to and achieve the expected effects.

4.2 Syntactical Means

There are several sentence forms that can be employed by advertisers to effectively emphasize certain parts in advertisements, the most important ones being cleft sentences, implicit clefts with stressed constituents, and some wh- questions.

(1) Cleft Sentences

Two main kinds of cleft sentence constructions can change the presupposition of an advertisement and put stress on certain information. These are: “It+be+ ...+that/wh-+...” and “What/who+...+be+...”

Example 1

It's not your handbag. It's not your neighborhood. It's not your boyfriend. It's your watch that tells most about who you are (Seiko Watch, from *People*).

>> X tells most about who you are.

X is your watch.

The employment of cleft construction “It+be+ ...+that/wh-+ ... ” makes the information between “It+be” and “that/wh-” become the emphasized new information. Now the information focus falls on “your watch,” which is the advertised product that the advertiser intends to stress. But for the cleft structure, it would become “Your watch tells most about who you are,” and the information focus will fall on “who you are”, which is not the information that the advertiser intends to emphasize.

The cleft structure “It+be+...+that/wh-+...” can emphasize different constituents of a sentence/utterance, thus change the presupposition information. The change makes certain information appear earlier than it does in an advertisement with an unmarked information focus:

Example 10

We have the perfect cup for every developmental stage (Gerber Toys, from *People*).

We may use the cleft structure “It+be+...+that/wh-+...” to emphasize different constituents of the above sentence to see how presupposition is changed and what information the advertiser intends to convey to the consumers:

[10] a. It is we who have the perfect cup for every developmental stage.

>> X have perfect the cup for every developmental stage.

X is we.

[10] b. It is the perfect cup that we have for every developmental stage.

>> We have X for every developmental stage.

X is the perfect cup.

[10] c. It is for every developmental stage that we have the perfect cup.

>> We have the perfect cup for X.

X is every developmental stage.

If the advertiser intends to inform his customers of the producer of the advertised product, [10]a. is a good choice. [10]b. is the best version for the advertiser to promote the advertised product and impress the customers. But if the special and unique characteristic of the advertised product is the selling point in this advertisement, the advertiser can choose [10] c., because “every developmental stage” is strongly stressed here.

The other cleft structure “What/who+...+be+...” can emphasize the subject, the object and the predicate parts by putting them at the end of the sentence, because the information focus of this cleft structure usually falls on the end of the sentence or on the position after “be”:

Example 11

Abreva[®] heals cold sores fast (Abreva[®] medicine, from *Newsweek*).

With the alteration in its presuppositions caused by the cleft sentence structure, this advertisement can be readjusted into different versions that possess different emphasized points.

[11] a. What Abreva[®] heals fast is cold sores.

>> Abreva[®] heals X fast.

X is cold sores.

[11] b. What heals cold sores fast is Abreva[®].

>> X heals cold sores fast.

X is Abreva[®].

[11] c. What Abreva[®] does is to heal cold sores fast.

>> Abreva[®] does X.

X is to heal cold sores fast.

The presuppositions of these three sentences are quite different, and the information focuses and stressed information vary. The advertiser can give prominence to and put stress on any part of information he intends to with the employment of the cleft sentence structure “What/who+...+be+...” There is another sentence form that often occurs in the advertisement and obtains a similar function with “What/who+...+be+...” , i.e., “All...be” Usually the information focus is put after “be” in such sentence form:

Example 2

All you connect with are your pictures (Kodak Easy share Printer, from *People*).

>> You connect with X.

X is your picture.

Example 12

All I want is... .

A wacky weekend together and ideas to get us there (Hotel service, from *People*).

>> I want X.

X is a wacky weekend together and ideas to get us there.

Example 13

All you do is peel off and apply (Crest White Strips, from *Newsweek*).

>> You do X.

X is to peel off and apply.

The cleft sentence structure plays an important role in the changing of presuppositions of an advertisement, and the change brings the alteration of information focuses and thus the emphasized information.

(2) Implicit clefts with stressed constituents

Levinson says that the particular presuppositions that seem to arise from the two cleft constructions seem also to be triggered simply by heavy stress on a constituent (1997, p.183). He gives some examples with upper-case characters indicating contrastive stress to illustrate the points:

a. Linguistics was/wasn't invented by CHOMSKY!

>> Someone invented linguistics.

(cf. It was/wasn't Chomsky that invented linguistics.)

b. John did/didn't compete in the OLYMPICS.

>> John did compete somewhere.

(cf. It was/wasn't in the Olympics that John competed.)

Advertisers often employ such strategy to emphasize particular part of the information with certain printed and written forms like the bold-type, capitals, italics and the upper-case to satisfy different marketing needs:

Example 14

Unisys announces 3D Visible Enterprise (Unisys Corporation, from *Forbes*).

The advertiser can put stress on different constituents with the employment of implicit clefts with stressed constituents.

[14] a. UNISYS announces 3D Visible Enterprise.

>> X announces 3D Visible Enterprise.

X is Unisys.

(It is Unisys that announces 3D Visible Enterprise.)

[14] b. Unisys announces 3D VISIBLE ENTERPRISE.

>> Unisys announces X.

X is VISIBLE ENTERPRISE.

(It is 3D Visible Enterprise that Unisys announces.)

The presuppositions alter when different constituents are stressed. [14] a. highlights the brand name of the advertised product while [14] b. puts stress on what unique functions the advertised product can perform. Both presuppositions and focused information are closely linked to the marketing needs presumed by advertisers, in order to meet various needs.

Advertisers try to make different information emphases by altering the presupposition information through employing some implicit cleft with stressed constituents, even without making any change in vocabularies in advertisements.

4.3 Other Means

In order to convey certain important information more effectively, the advertisers also try other means to achieve their final goals besides the lexical and syntactical means. Owing to the special characteristics of print advertising, advertisers focus their wisdom and tricks on language use, format arrangement, print forms, and other important aspects that appear on the page. Sometimes they use certain rhetorical means with the assistance of graphic or other means to emphasize some information in advertisements. For example:

Example 15

Feel More.

Fine Champagne Cognac (Rémy Martin, from *Fortune*).

This is very simple, but easy to accept and remember. The advertiser presupposes that he and the consumers are in a certain situation where he suggests that they “feel more.” In this presupposed situation is a bottle of champagne – Rémy Martin as the background picture of this advertisement. The advertiser omits the object of the first utterance, whereas the beautiful picture tells the readers what the object is and this makes this object, also the advertised product easier to remember.

In the second utterance, the upper-case characters stress the quality and trait of the advertised product, and make it very impressive. With the employment of the ellipse, the advertiser cannot only save the advertising costs but also stress the important information he intends to convey.

The combination of linguistical, rhetorical and other devices like graphics or various printed forms helps the focused information in advertisements more attractive and impressive, and also makes the reading a pleasant enjoyment.

Summary

In this paper, we have examined 15 advertisements culled from English newspapers and magazines to see how presuppositions serve the communication strategies and how they contribute to the brevity and diversity of print advertising language. With the employment of presupposition, new information in advertisements can be easily conveyed and the advertising language also becomes brief, diversifying, and attractive.

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