

Presupposition-triggers and the Linguistic Features of 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. Seventeen advertisements, culled from English newspapers and magazines, are analyzed to examine the roles that presupposition plays in strategies of pragmatic maneuver. This study is significant in providing certain possible theoretical guidance to the print advertising practitioners to design successful advertising texts.

Key Words: Presupposition; pragmatic; advertising language.

1. Introduction

Normally, people spend little time on reading the advertisements in magazines or newspapers. How to attract and impress the consumers with a short advertisement when they are just throwing a quick glimpse on it, and how to make them remember the information and to take a purchase action is an important task for the advertisers. The advertisers of print advertising try every means to design brief, interesting, impressive, and persuasive advertising language with heavily loaded information. Among those means, presupposition is an effective tool that plays an important role in achieving the advertising goals.

There is also another reason to explain why presupposition keeps a close relationship with the brevity and diversity of advertising language: the impossibility of complete explicitness of language. However, the implicit meaning is, to certain extent, the background information that is shared by both communicators. The called background information, which could not be spoken out or completely explicated but inferred or understood by some conventional means to cope with that impossibility of complete explicitness. Verschueren points out that presupposition is the first category of such conventional means to link explicit contents to relevant aspects of background information. The presupposition-carrying expressions and constructions are very useful means to impart heavily-loaded information into brief and concise sentences or utterances. With the employment of presupposition-triggers, the advertising language can become more brief, diversifying, impressive, and persuasive.

This paper will discuss in detail how presupposition-triggers help advertising language satisfy the advertising needs and achieve advertising goals. Presupposition-triggers contribute to the brevity and diversity of advertising language because advertisers can convey the advertised information through various presupposition-triggers in accordance with the actual needs. The following example is an assertion that can be realized in various forms:

Example 1

We're not just breaking new ground with our vehicles (Honda vehicles, from *Forbes*).

- [1] a. Why are we not just breaking new ground with our vehicles?
- [1] b. Do you know that we are not just breaking new ground with our vehicles?
- [1] c. How are we not just breaking new ground with our vehicles?
- [1] d. It is we that are not just breaking new ground with our vehicles.

The following analysis will show how presuppositions with various presupposition-triggers serve the brevity and diversity of advertising language.

2. *Presupposition-triggers and the Lexical Features of Advertising Language*

In advertising language that adjective, verbs, personal nouns and some particles occur in high frequency. Here we will check how presupposition-carrying words or phrases serve the brevity and diversity.

(1) **Definite description**

Definite descriptions are words or phrases that indicate definite meaning. Proper names, possessive constructions, names with modifiers all fall in this category. Presuppositions triggered by definite descriptions are existential presuppositions.

Example 2

The doctor's favorite cake

Dense and nutty. The South Beach Diet Cook book's flavorless chocolate cake with almonds has 150 calories, 9g fat, 10g saturated, 5g proteins, 149 carbs per serving. Made with bitter sweet chocolate and fat-free sour cream, it's a frequent treat in Agatston home (Agatston cake, from *People*).

>> There exists a doctor.

The doctor has a favorite cake.

The definite article "the" presupposes the existence of a doctor, while the possessive construction "doctor's" presupposes that the doctor has a favorite cake. It is generally held by most people that doctors know well how to keep healthy diets, and their favorite foods are usually nutritious and healthy. The above advertisement just takes a good use of such consumers' psychology of following the authority, to persuade the potential consumers to follow the doctor's choice. With this presupposition-trigger, the advertiser does not need to toil in explaining that here exists a doctor and this doctor has a favorite cake but only to use "The doctor's favorite cake" to convey the advertised information, thus save words and space.

(2) **Factive verbs**

Example 3

We **know** there's a lot riding on your next home (Remax real estate, from *People*)

>> There is a lot riding on your next home.

The advertiser presupposes that he knows the fact of commuting that obsesses the consumers. To absolve this problem, the consumers can appeal for the advertised product, Remax real estate.

(3) **Implicative verbs**

Example 4

You **managed** to reduce your cholesterol?

Introducing Minute Maid Heart Wise with added cholesterol reducers (Drinks, from *People*).

>> You tried hard to reduce your cholesterol.

With the word "manage", the advertisement presupposes that the consumers did make effort to reduce their cholesterol. Thus a new kind of drink is introduced, which can reduce cholesterol and is good for heart.

(4) **Change of state verbs**

Example 5

Stop waiting for the right time to start to look and feel your best. (Health Club, from *People*).

>> You have been waiting for the right time to start to look and feel your best.

Here the advertiser uses the verb "stop" to trigger the presupposition that the potential customers have been in an unpleasant state that they are eager to change.

(5) **Verbs of judging**

With the employment of such presupposition-triggers, the speaker can express his/her judgment via the subject of the utterance:

Example 6

We build advanced, energy-saving air conditioner systems for homes, office buildings, shopping plazas, and trains to help the world breathe a little easier. Mitsubishi electronic air conditioner, the only one **praised** by experts (Mitsubishi electronic, from *Fortune*).

>> Experts think Mitsubishi electronic air conditioner is good.

By the employment of the verb of judging “praise”, this advertisement presupposes that “Mitsubishi electronic air conditioner is good” through the mouth of “experts”. Such presupposition-triggers can enhance the persuasive power of advertising language enormously.

(6) Iterative**Example 7**

So soon, your beautiful baby’s skin will look and feel beautiful **again** (Pharmaceuticals, from *People*).

>> Your beautiful baby’s skin looked and felt beautiful before.

Example 8

Common Stock: wake me when it’s over. I am **no longer** worried (Investment Company, from *Economist*).

>> I have been worried until now.

Employing the presupposition-triggers “again” and “no longer,” the advertisers emphasize the happy and pleasant results after the use of the advertised product and service. Without spending more time and words in mentioning what happened before, “again” and “no longer” presuppose the unpleasant state in the past and motivate the consumers to take actions to change them.

3. Presupposition-triggers and the Syntactical Features of Advertising Language

Advertising language has its own preference of syntactical forms, some sentence forms such as questions, imperatives, and elliptical sentences occur in high frequency. In this sub-section, we will examine how presupposition-carrying structures work to serve the brevity and diversity of advertising language.

(1) Temporal clauses

The temporal clauses contain presuppositions, such as the clauses introduced by *before*, *while*, *since*, *after*, *during*, *whenever*, and *as*.

Example 9

How I relax **after** a long day of creating architecture for humanity... (Eleornes chair, from *Forbes*).

>>I had a long day of creating architecture for humanity...

With the temporal clause, the advertiser presupposes the consumer’s tiredness and the desire to eliminate it. The presupposed information can easily draw the attention from those potential consumers and arouse their interest in the advertised products.

(2) Cleft sentences

Cleft constructions and pseudo-cleft constructions can emphasize certain components of a sentence and they are frequently employed in advertising language to convey various emphasized information. This has been discussed in details and will not be examined again here.

(3) Implicit clefts with stressed constituents

Implicit cleft with stressed constituents is a kind of stress constitution that is not shown in sentence structures but in some other stress forms like bold type, underlined type, italic, upper-case, etc. in written copies. Particular presuppositions can be triggered by the heavy stresses on certain constituents, and such category frequently occurs in print advertising language to meet the advertising needs.

(4) Comparisons and contrasts

Usually, comparisons and contrasts are marked by particles like *too*, *back*, *in return*, or by comparative constructions. Generally speaking, most customers only make the purchase decision after a careful comparison among products or services within the same line. In accordance to such consumers’ psychology, advertisers prefer the employment of comparisons and contrasts to show the unique features of the advertised products or services. For example:

Example 10

The **most** competitive premiums in the world (International Private Health Care Ltd., from *Newsweek*).

>> The premiums are the cheapest in the world.

Example 11

Nothing treats cradle cap or the dry, red itchy patches of baby eczema **more** gently, naturally or effectively **than** gentle Naturals from Baby Orajel® (Pharmaceuticals, from *People*).

In these two examples, the advertisers respectively employ comparative constructions and to show the incomparable edges or unique features of the advertised product and service.

(5) Non-restrictive relative clauses**Example 12**

Our experience with IT infrastructures, systems integration, enterprise network communications and computing gives us the knowledge and resources to help companies realize total security management effectively, **which is good news for today's business leaders**, is another example of NEC empowering people through innovation. (NEC Company, from the *Economist*).

>> It is good news for today's business leaders that our experience with IT infrastructures, systems integration, enterprise network communications and computing gives us the knowledge and resources to help companies realize total security management effectively.

Non-restrictive relative clauses can provide more conditional information with less words and space to enable the advertisements achieve the final goal without being long winded.

(6) Counterfactual conditionals**Example 13**

If I had a guarantee, then I'd love them. Lens Crafters' 30-day money-back guarantee (Lens Crafters glasses, from *People*).

>> I don't have a guarantee.

The presupposition here is that actually the speaker doesn't have a product guarantee, so he worries about the after-sale service: if the purchased product is not as good as expected, can he get his money back? Every consumer wishes that his/her purchase can be guaranteed. Therefore, the advertiser introduces the advertised product and removes the consumers' worries and meets their needs.

(7) Questions**Example 14**

Are you living with mild or moderate eczema? (Medicine, from *People*)

>> Either you are living with mild or moderate eczema or you are not.

Yes/no questions refer to the questions that have "Yes" or "No" as their answers. Advertisers raise such questions to draw attention and arouse interest from advertisement recipients, once the readers say "yes" or "no" to the questions, they become the potential customers of the advertisements, meanwhile, part of the advertising goals is thus realized. Sometimes, advertisers answer the questions that put forward by their own to emphasize certain information or achieve certain effect:

Example 15

Can inspiration make the minivan amazing again? Yes.

Can it make a mountain of stuff disappear? Yes.

And can two rows of seats fold into the floor, giving you tons of space one minute and room for seven the next?

With exclusive Stow'nGo™ seating and storage---amazingly, yes (Chrysler car, from *People*).

With the positive answers in the above advertisement, the advertisers introduce their product confidently. Such language device makes the advertised product far more trustable and purchasable.

Example 16

Why you get life insurance? (Insurance company, from *People*)

>> You get life insurance.

Example 17

What's missing from your low carb breakfast? (Total[®] Protein food, from *People*)

>> Something is missing from your low carb breakfast.

The presuppositions illustrated in [16] and [17] might lead the receivers to believe that the information presented is necessarily true, rather than just the presuppositions of the advertisers asking the questions.

Summary

In this paper, we have examined 17 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 and focused information in advertisements can be easily conveyed and the advertising language also becomes brief, diversifying and attractive.

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