

Ambivalence and Contradiction in Advertising Discourse

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Abstract:

Advertising language which is said to attest artful deviation of linguistic forms focuses not only on effective conscious communication, but also on the degree of unconscious effect or an 'unavoidable' indirect-convincing effect of communication.

In order to make communication effective, both 'direct-convincing' and 'indirect-convincing' communicative ways are found to be employed by the copywriter. In order to serve these multiple communicative effects, the ad-texts are found to use *Ambiguous* constructions or even *Contradictory* statements where more than one proposition is involved in a single syntactic unit. 'Ambivalence' and 'Contradiction' can be said to be such an artful deviation of linguistic form that both are observed in many advertising discourses. The relevance or cohesion of the predications are established by the target observers owing much to the pragmatic aspects or the extra-linguistic factors like socio-cultural, socio-economic, psycho-social aspects of the setting in particular, where the advertisement is being made.

It is worthy to mention in this connection that, the notions of 'Ambivalence' and 'Contradiction' that will be dealt with in this study of advertising discourse have been observed in the mass media of the city of Kolkata and the data for this purpose has been collected from the advertising media.

Keywords:

Abstracto

El lenguaje publicitario que avala la desviación artística de formas lingüísticas se enfoca no sólo en la comunicación efectiva y conciente, sino también en el grado de efecto inconciente o un efecto inevitable e indirecto de la comunicación. Para lograr una comunicación efectiva, el publicista emplea maneras comunicativas y convincentes de manera directa o indirecta. En algunas ocasiones y para lograr servir estos múltiples efectos comunicativos, los textos publicitarios utilizan construcciones ambiguas o declaraciones contradictorias donde más de una proposición es insertada en una sola unidad sintáctica. La "ambivalencia" y la "contradicción" dentro del discurso publicitario pueden considerarse como un tipo de desviación de una forma lingüística. La relevancia o cohesión de las postulaciones son establecidas por el blanco de los observadores debiendo más a los aspectos desagradables o los factores extra-lingüísticos como los aspectos socio-culturales, socio-económicos, psycho-sociales del ambiente en particular donde se produce la publicidad.

Vale la pena mencionar que las nociones de “ambivalencia” y “contradicción” que se han trabajado en este estudio del discurso publicitario fueron observadas en los medios de comunicación de la ciudad de Calcutta y la data se recolectó de los medios publicitarios.

Palabras claves:

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1.0. Introduction:

An organization of text that provides information about a product or service along with an anchorage of image that suggest some cohesion or logical linkage leading to some relevance or meaningful interpretation to the target consumers, can be referred to as advertisement. Advertising language, which is said to attest artful deviation of linguistic forms, focuses not only on effective conscious communication, but also on the degree of unconscious effect or an ‘unavoidable’ indirect-convincing effect of communication. In order to make communication effective, both ‘direct-convincing’ and ‘indirect-convincing’ communicative ways are found to be employed by the copywriter. In order to serve these multiple communicative effects, the ad-texts are found to use ambiguous constructions or even contradictory statements where more than one proposition is involved in a single syntactic unit.

In the process of organizing an advertising text, the ‘signifier’/ ‘signified’ relationship as defined by F.D. Saussure (1959) is distorted, twisted or extended – sporting with what is called the “arbitrariness of sign”. Therefore the creative

communication in advertisement is possible by the pragmatic rebuilding of the arbitrary relationship of the object, idea or concept with the specific linguistic structures in the specific linguistic system. Vestergaard and Schroder (1985) point out that cohesion, as a clear marker, is not found in the advertising language, rather it is the interpretation of the advertisement message that demands coherence from the point of view of the consumer's understanding. The meaningful aspect of an advertising discourse sometimes depends much on the pragmatic expectation of a particular socio-cultural setting where the advertisement is being organized.

2.0. *The Notions*

'Ambivalence' and 'Contradiction' can be said to be such an artful deviation of linguistic form that is observed in many advertising discourse. It is worthy to mention in this connection that, the notions of 'Ambivalence' and 'Contradiction' that will be dealt with in this study of advertising discourse have been observed in the mass media of the city of Kolkata and the data for this purpose has been collected from the advertising media. Each of these two notions will be dealt with in the following sections respectively.

2.1. *Ambivalence*

The concept of 'ambiguity', a property of sentence is defined by Leech (1981, p. 79) "...as a (declarative) sentence which expresses more than one proposition. This reflects a difference between levels of a linguistic statement: sentences are syntactic units, whereas propositions are semantic units; ambiguity is a one too-many relation between syntax and sense." Because of the arbitrary relationship between sign and referent, multiple meanings are potentially understood as a feature of 'language

universal'. This multiplicity of propositions within a single syntactic unit is employed to communicate effectively, an advertising text by the copywriter to the target consumers. But there are cases where advertising language ambiguity is observed to be a conscious and careful initiation. Thus, departing 'ambiguity', we enter in the arena of 'ambivalence'.

2.2. Contradiction

Contradiction of propositions in concatenation is often found to *destabilize* some conventional meaning of object or idea that is involved in a statement. The term 'Contradiction' is referred to by Leech (1981, p. 5) as "...statements which are by virtue of meaning, necessarily false... These are more decidedly deviant than tautologies: they are not just information-wise vacuous, but are downright nonsensical". Such necessarily false or nonsensical propositions in concatenation, *destabilizes* the meaning of the statement in itself. Advertising discourse which is a deliberate effort on the part of the copywriter *destabilizes* the meaning aspect of the advertising text in order to convey a sense of impossibility or absurdity of the whole communicative setting, thus making the ad-text catchy at once.

The pragmatic expectation of a particular socio-cultural setting where the advertisement is being organized, necessarily enables an observer or a target consumer to suggest some cohesion or logical linkage leading to some relevance or meaningful interpretation of the ad-text and therefore making the notion of 'ambiguity' and 'contradiction' apparent.

3.0. Ambivalence in AD-Text

Ambiguity, as pointed out by Asher (1991, p. 53) can be realized at two levels - grammatical or functional level (e.g. flying planes can be dangerous) and at the lexical level in terms of 'polysemy' (e.g. plot, branch) and 'homonymy' (e.g. port, flock). Grice (1975) points out that its fundamental principle of 'normal' and ordinary communication is to make coherent and effective exchange, of ideas which should be the result of a cooperative principle of effective communication. In this connection he elaborates the term 'maxim of manner', a communicative principle that helps avoid obscurity and ambiguity in normal communication, thus pointing out the fact that in 'normal communication' ambiguity is unintentional and can be avoided with 'care'. But in the case of advertising discourse, 'ambiguity' is initiated intentionally in order to make the communication effective, which is called 'Ambivalence' (already mentioned before in section 2.1)

3.1. Ambivalence which is termed as 'amphibology' or 'amphiboly' in traditional rhetorics, can be defined as ambiguous speech act which is intentional, motivated by demographic and socio-cultural/ socio-economic factors. Such a syntactic structure having more than one illocutionary 'force' is evident from the advertising text mentioned below.

1. *Clothes for unmatched people.*

[print media Adv. of a designer wear- 'Ritu Wear']

The effect of 'ambivalence' of the above ad-text can be observed in terms of the following two interpretations (a) and (b).

- (a) Clothes are desired to ‘match’ the people who wear them. So if it does not ‘match’, then it is not desirable.

This interpretation at once captures the attention of the target consumer by ‘indirect-convincing’ communication (mentioned earlier) by the negative social value of an ‘undesirable situation’ of being ‘unmatched’(a linguistic structure with a prefix having negative value). As soon as the ‘negative value’ is communicated to the consumer, that text is interrogated by the individual for the second time, as to how a linguistic construction with a ‘negative social value’ is placed in a social system (e.g. mass media like hoarding / magazine/television) which is expected to be ideally positive. Such an interrogation of the same individual triggers his thinking process in order to understand the positive value of the ad-text and he is motivated to go through the same ad-text for the third time and ultimately receives the second interpretation or the conscious interpretation as -

- (b) Clothes of the particular designer store is for ‘exclusive’ and ‘special’ people who does not ‘match’ with the general mass (in terms of finance or intellect, etc.)

This very sense of being ‘special’ helps in boasting indirectly the ever desired feeling of human being and the individual is motivated to visit and purchase from ‘Ritu Wears’, in order to prove himself/herself ‘special’ in his/her social setting.

Therefore the ‘ambivalent’ effect of this syntactic structure tells us that the negative attribute of the clothes is transformed to socially ‘positive’ attribute of an individual, thus capturing not only the multiple meaning but rather a diametrically opposite meaning (e.g. negative and positive aspects) of the ambivalent linguistic structure.

Such other advertising texts can be exemplified below.

2. Eng. *Book for a Figure Correction Package*. (Anchored by the picture of a very fat lady)

[Advertisement of VLCC Health club]

The term 'figure' means 'number or numeral' and 'shape of body' as well. When the term is used in juxtaposition of the term 'correction' it appears to convey the meaning of 'numeral'. But the anchored picture and the name of the health club help to understand the other meaning, i.e. 'shape of body'.

3. Bg. *amra chaRa khObor hOY na* (anchored by the photographs of the two prominent media personalities)

[gloss: There can be no news without /except us.]

[Hoarding advertisement of a newly launched TV channel-Kolkata TV]

The catch of this ad-text lies with the form "amra" which initially may sound too arrogant on the part of the two prominent personalities to the observers. This may convey a negative feeling to the sentiment of the mass (viewers) because of the 'over estimation of oneself', that is projected by the photographs of the popular personalities. But on second thought the viewer understands that it is not any individual but a newly launched TV channel, a mass media for which this advertisement is being made.

It is worthy to mention in this context that 'ambivalence' has been observed to be operative at the lexical level as far as the data (collected from the mass media of the city of Kolkata) of the present work is concerned. The linguistic forms which are functionally attributive have been observed to be the potential lexical items for 'ambivalence' in advertising texts.

3.2. Apart from the already discussed instances of 'ambivalent' advertising texts, another kind of ad-text can be observed which not only plays with 'intentional double speak', but

also attaches an additional linguistic value which can be traced as having a ‘comic effect’. It is this comic effect that acts as a first ‘catch’. Then the multiple value of the particular linguistic structure is unfolded one by one by the observers (or target consumers). Such kind of linguistic structure is traditionally identified as “Pun”. “Puns exploit the same lexical and grammatical ambiguities referred to above, but for a comic effect.”(Asher 1991, p. 54)

As observed in different advertisements, the advertising language that can be identified as ‘pun’ can be of three different types depending upon the formal structure.

These are as follows:

1. General Pun
2. Antanaclasis
3. Resonant pun

Each of these puns as they appear in the language of advertisement will be illustrated and exemplified below.

1. General Pun

A particular lexical item in a linguistic discourse having a multiple meaning is often used to convey a ‘comic’ effect in advertising language.

1. *Metro Dairy IceCream--- jar kache Onno ice cream ThanDa.*
[gloss: Metro Dairy Ice Cream- in relation to which other ice –creams are cold]
(an audio-visual advertisement)

Here the term ‘ThanDa’ has two meanings - one denotative and the other connotative.

Though the denotative meaning of the term is ‘cold’, the connotative meaning is ‘less delicious’. Ice-cream is necessarily to be cold and here lies the catch. When interrogated as what extra can a consumer get in metro dairy ice-cream, the second interpretation automatically triggers in the consumer’s understanding. Thus the comic effect is conveyed by such ambivalent construction.

Some other instances are presented in the following:

2. Eng. *Get a kick above the waist line.*
(a print media advertisement of 'Colour Plus' branded shirts)
3. Hindi. *ie andar ki baat hEY.*
(an audiovisual advertisement of 'Lux Cotswool' snickers)
[gloss: This is an internal or secretive matter of understanding]

2. Antanaclasis

Repeating a particular lexical item in two different senses in a single discourse involving a 'comic' effect, can be observed in advertising language. Such a linguistic phenomenon in traditional rhetorics is termed as 'antanaclasis'.

For example,

1. Bg.
Setting: Two old men gossiping and enjoying two cups of tea with a 'marie biscuit' of local brand.
First man says: *ei serial dekhte dekhte amader bangla litarecarTa Dube gElo.*
[gloss: Due to the interest of the people for these TV serials, our Bangla literature is about to go out of practice.]
While saying this, the man dips the 'marie biscuit' into his cup of tea to soften it.
Second man says (with lots of laugh): *apnar 'marie Ta'o je cae Dube gElo.*
[gloss: Your 'marie' also has sunk in the cup of tea.]

(An Audio-visual Advertisement)

Following this conversation, it is proposed to have 'marie biscuit' of 'Britannia', a branded company of biscuits, so they will not sink and at the same time will be softened or will retain their crisp when dipped into the tea.

Thus, linguistic form 'Dube gElo' is used twice in the same discourse in two different senses- coexistence of concrete and an abstract concept.

2. Eng. *Tommorow's technology doesn't always have to wait until tommorow.*
(Print media advertisement of 'Jetter Reynold' Pen)
3. Hindi. *khao light jio light.*
(An audio-visual advertisement of a brand of edible oil)
[gloss: Eat light, live (comfortable) with light weight]

3. Resonant Pun

A linguistic construction when used to convey different meanings along with a comic effect anchoring picture is called 'resonant pun'.

For example,

Hindi. *Pepsi safe nehi hEY.*

[gloss: Pepsi is not safe]

(An audio-visual advertisement of a brand of cold drink)

The ad-text is anchored by the picture of the renowned film star Sharukh Khan going very secretly to open an iron box which is bound by iron chains and a heavy lock. On opening the box, he finds to his utter astonishment that another renowned cricket player Sachin Tendulkar is sitting like a thief inside the box amidst bottles of Pepsi cold drinks. Therefore Sharukh Khan remarks that Pepsi is not *safe*.

This advertisement is made in the backdrop of a particular social setting when there was a case going on against the Pepsi company claiming the particular soft drink that the company is manufacturing is not safe for health. As a result of such propaganda the company started incurring in heavy losses.

In the ad-text, the term *safe* when heard at once may confirm the existing unsafe situation of consuming the soft - drink, but on second thought it conveys just the opposite meaning: that Pepsi is not safe because people like Sachin Tendulkar is even after that particular drink, entering and sitting inside the box like a thief . This indirectly tells the target consumers that Pepsi is delicious and not at all *unsafe*, otherwise the conscious people like these two celebrities would not be after this cold drink. Thus ambivalence is employed with a comic effect . Pun is rightly defined by Attridge (1988, p. 141) as “The Pun is the product of a context deliberately constructed to enforce an ambiguity, to render impossible the choice between meanings, to leave the reader or hearer endlessly oscillating in semantic space”.

4.0. *Contradictory Proposition in Ad-Text*

As already discussed above in section 2.2, contradiction of propositions in concatenation that *destabilizes* some conventional meaning of object or idea involved in a statement are necessarily false or nonsensical. The meaning of such statement of the advertising discourse which is a deliberate effort on the part of the copy writer, *destabilizes* the meaning aspect of the advertising text in order to convey a sense of impossibility or absurdity of the whole communicative setting.

Some self contradictory statements in advertising discourse have been observed in the following advertisements.

4.1.

Bg. flETeo thaki amo paRi

gloss: (I) live in a flat and also pluck mango.

flETeo thaki macho dhorī

gloss: (I) live in a flat and also catch fish

[A hoarding advertisement of a real estate company
'Fortune City']

The apparent contradiction lies in the fact of city life. In city life, where there is lack of space, the 'flat' concept as human residence is a widely spread these days.

So the concept of 'flat' itself is very much an urban concept which is devoid of large greenery and large water bodies where mango and fish are available, respectively. Thus 'mango' and 'fish' concepts contradict the 'flat' concept. In spite of lulling a positive attitude for a long time towards urbanization, people are becoming tired of the humdrum city life. As a result, the desire for a lush green surrounding and cooling water bodies is an increasing phenomenon these days. Therefore, in order to fulfill both, the facilities of urban life and the desire for natural surroundings have been

used by the copy writer by promising both of them in purchasing the real estate which is built, away from the heart of the city, but connected with good communication facilities and with a better natural ambience than what is expected in a city life. Thus the existing socio-economic reality of the Kolkata city life is apparently destabilized by the two contradictory propositions in concatenation and therefore makes the ad-text catchy.

4.2. Hindi. sardime bhi garmi ki ehsas.

gloss: In winter also (it is) the feeling of summer.

[A print media ad. of 'Lux cotswool']

The concepts of 'winter and 'summer' are in opposition to one's feeling, i.e., cold and warm respectively. The question arises as to how someone can feel warm in winter, destabilizes the surface structure of the statement. It is the 'Lux cotswool' garments that brings back the cohesion and makes the ad-text relevant.

4.3. Bg. uttom SOhor moddhom game.

gloss: Best city in better village ('moddhom gram' is actually the name of a place away from the city of Kolkata)

[A hoarding ad. of a real estate in a place named 'Moddhom gram']

The ideas of 'best' and 'better', 'city' and 'village' in concatenation destabilizes the statement as to how a city which is qualitatively in of first grade can be established in a village which is of second grade, then making the surface structure of the ad-text catchy. But with second thought the people of the city get the catch and understand that it is not a 'village of second grade' but a place name which they already know.

4.4. Eng. New tales of tradition

[A hoarding ad. of a fashionable shop of gold ornaments named 'Tanishque']

The terms 'new' and 'tradition' apparently creates a semantic anomaly as the arguments of the main predication seem to be self -contradictory. But in reality, the message conveys that the newly established gold ornament shop of the city sells those products which have traditional value, but are shaped in new form. Thus consumers with both the modern and traditional attitude will find their desirable ornaments in the same shop.

4.5. Eng. Get ready to be assaulted

[A hoarding ad. of a branded men's underwear]

The predicates of the main predication in the above ad-text contains two contrasting/ opposing psycho-social notions - 'getting ready' and 'to be assaulted' in juxtaposition. No man keeps one's self ready for such an assault by a woman. But the anchored picture in the hoarding illustrates the attraction of a man to a woman for wearing the brand underwear. The advertisement demands that this branded undergarment provokes the opposite sex in such a way that the person wearing those undergarments almost gets sexually assaulted, makes the advertisement relevant to the target observers.

5.0. Conclusion:

As far as linguistic conventions are concerned, advertisements take liberties in modifying the natural order of the language depending upon the product of advertisement and the target group of the consumer, and in doing so, captures the listener's or reader's attention and enable them to arrive at certain point of understanding affecting the reference of the product. This motivates the listeners or readers to reconstruct the linguistic organization that is meaningful to the realm of advertising.

We could see that a connection is necessarily established between ‘contradiction’ and cohesion that is made possible by the copywriter of the above discussed advertising discourse.

The ‘contradiction’ or ‘opposition’ of arguments that are used in concatenation *destabilizes* the existing semantic features of the statement of the advertising discourse. Later it is this *destabilization* of the proposition that leads to construct a new proposition or a new semantic feature which is otherwise called ‘downgrading’. The open-endedness of the semantic interpretations of a lexical item or the ‘unlimited complexity’ of word-meaning that can be attained through ‘downgrading’ or ‘subordinating’ (Leech 1974, p. 148) helps a copy writer to create new semantic features out of the existing semantic feature. Thus the relevance or cohesion of the predications are established by the target observers owing a much to the pragmatic aspects or the extra-linguistic factors like socio-cultural, socio-economic, psycho-social aspects of the setting in particular, where the advertisement is being aired.

Thus while commenting on the formal and semantic aspects of advertisement one can self refrain from making any value-loaded comment from a strict ethical point of view, but to incorporate the linguistic fall out of advertisements in the arena of language research, the media ads would eventually highlight the changing path of a new breed of urban discourse.

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