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Some Linguistic Features in Print and Electronic Advertisements in Nigeria

Abiodun Akintayo

Senior Lecturer, Department of General Studies,
Lagos State University of Science and Technology, Ikorodu, Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract:

The use of language often determines the success or failure of any advertising drive; therefore, the linguistic details of advertising texts are carefully structured to communicate the right message to the right people at the right time. This paper examines the linguistic features in print and electronic media advertisements in Nigeria to establish linguistic creativity in this field. The data for the study were collected from Nigerian national newspapers, magazines, radio, and television commercial advertisements for products and services. The findings show a plurality of advertising techniques and linguistic features such as synthetic personalization, referential indirectness, use of pidgin, caveats, code-mixing and how figurative usage impinges on the meaning of advertisements. The paper concludes by recommending that advertisers in Nigeria should be more honest by emphasizing contextually relevant and unobtrusive advertisements intended to help rather than inundate consumers.

Keywords: Advertisements, print/electronic media, linguistic features, semiotics

1. Introduction

Advertising is a field of human endeavour where language plays a crucial role. In whatever guise, advertising is quintessentially a language game, and the advertising industry is a language community because of the way language is deployed creatively and imaginatively in this field. The linguistic details of advertising texts are not just accidental but are delicately and carefully structured to communicate the right message to the right people at the right time. Recent studies conducted on advertising strategies in Nigeria reveal that advertisers spend large sums of money to project and propagate their messages to the target audience with the sole aim of persuading them to take a course of action. It is also revealed that the use of language often determines the success or failure of any advertising drive. David Crystal (1995, p.388) states: "It is a language which can make or break an ad". The use of language in advertising has, therefore, proved very fruitful for investigation because language is projected not just as a means of communicating ideas but also as a tool for accomplishing goal-directive actions. Advertising practitioners deploy language in a way that is markedly different from language use in other domains; consequently, this has produced a plethora of new coinages, lexical items, catch-phrases, and rhetorical and persuasive strategies, which have become an addition to the linguistic inventory of advertising.

Scholars have defined advertising in a variety of ways. Kotler (1980) defines it as: 'the use of paid media by a seller to communicate persuasive information about his products, services and organization'. Another widely-accepted definition of advertising was given by Stanton (1981, p.314), who states: 'Advertising consists of all the activities involved in presenting to a group, a non-personal, oral or visual, openly sponsored message regarding a product, service or idea'.

Coulson-Thomas (1983, p.214) describes advertising as: 'any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion, which informs or persuades about (ideas, goods or services), so long as it is undertaken by an identified sponsor.

The definitions above focus on some salient facts:

- First, advertising is a sponsored message;
- Second, it is persuasive information about goods or services and
- Third, it is communicated to a target audience.

All the advertisement messages in this study are about goods and services, sponsored by individuals or corporate bodies and are directed to specific audience.

2. Literature Review

There are several studies conducted by scholars on advertising in Nigeria from different perspectives. Okocha, Kossi and Terhile (2023) examined digital advertising: its prospects and challenges. The study focused on figuring out the benefits and challenges of digital advertising. It adopted users' gratification and diffusion of innovation theories for the study. Akintayo (2022) investigated the taxonomy of the relationship between pictures and texts in print media advertisements. The study reflected how pictures and texts interact to impinge on the meaning of an advertisement, and

Peircean's semiotic theory provided the theoretical and descriptive framework for the study. Udenze and Aduba (2020) investigated online advertising in Nigeria and sought to ascertain an examination of approaches in Facebook and Instagram. The aim of the research was to analyze the extent Nigerian businesses are utilizing social media to advertise their products. Oyesomi and Salawu (2019) researched the uniqueness of indigenous language and how figurative language is used to communicate meaning in Yoruba telecommunication advertisements. Akinbode (2012) focused on the essential characteristics of advertising language in the mass media, which enables advertisers to reach target audiences and find out how advertising language influences consumers' purchasing attitudes. Bardi (2010) described some of the new trends in advertising in Nigeria, which include the practice of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC), which is the combination of various marketing communication techniques like advertising, public relations, publicity, sales promotions, events marketing, etc, in carrying out a promotional campaign. The study identified the proliferation of advertising agencies as one of the challenges facing advertising in Nigeria. Okanlawon and Oluga (2008) investigated the various forms of language used by advertisers of goods and services to capture the attention of the target audience or prospective customers to make them desire the advertised goods and services. The study presented the outcome and analysis of 80 randomly selected contemporary Nigerian advertisements. Dalamu (2008) explicated the utilization of grammatical and lexical devices in the texts of advertisements in Nigeria to demonstrate the way advertising professionals move from disjunctive organic elements to clause complexes as a convincing strategy.

Advertising in Nigeria is a very fruitful investigation; consequently, there are numerous other types of research on advertising that have not been mentioned in this paper because of space constraints. However, relevant works to this study have been given credible mention. This research is unique because it is a combination of print and electronic advertisements, and the perspective is primarily on linguistic details, and this extends beyond figurative language usage in advertising.

3. Types of Advertising

Advertising is an all-pervasive concept because it permeates the whole of our lives: educational, socio-economic, political, religious, private or public. Advertising is everywhere; we are inundated and overwhelmed with it. We encounter it when we walk down the street, in the shop, watch television, listen to the radio, or read a newspaper. Given this ubiquity, advertising is difficult, almost impossible, to ignore. Gillian Dyer (1986, p.1) succinctly captures this:

Anyone living and working in any modern society today is under the influence of advertising. Every day and for most of our lives, we see and hear many advertisements. Even if you do not read a newspaper or watch television and walk around the streets with eyes down, you will find it impossible to avoid some form of publicity, even if it is only a trade display at a local store, uninvited handbills pushed through the letter box or corner by newsagents.

There are various types of advertising that are in use, and it is crucial that we examine each of them in detail because the data in this study falls into some of the categories. *Covert* advertisement is predominantly used in entertainment, such as television or stage shows in the theatre. A product or brand is carefully and conspicuously embedded in the presentation. For example, in a film, the major character can use an item or product of a definite brand. All the characters in a soap opera can drink a particular brand of beverage, i.e. Coca-Cola or use a mobile phone with the Techno logo clearly engraved on it. *Branding* is another advertising variety which is the marking of a product to indicate that it is produced by a particular company. Due to the prevalence of sub-standard products and unregulated sharp practices of unscrupulous manufacturers, brands were introduced to increase the reputation and value of a particular manufacturer. An identified brand often means safety and quality. Customers also show brand loyalty by always buying a particular brand. There is also a *Mobile billboard*, which is a flat panel campaign unit whose sole purpose is to carry advertisements along dedicated routes selected by clients prior to the start of a campaign. Mobile displays are used for numerous campaigns such as sporting events, religious programmes, target advertising, and one-day and long-term campaigns on issues that bring about public good.

Guerrilla promotion is another advertising innovation which involves unusual approaches, such as staged shows in highly populated public places like motor parks, marketplaces, campuses, etc. It also involves giving away products that are covered with brand messages. In military parlance, they talk of 'guerrilla warfare'; this is a warfare tactic whereby military groups make sudden and unexpected attacks on their opponents. Guerrilla promotion bears a striking semblance to this simply because staged encounters by advertisers are done in unusual and unexpected public places. *Product advertising* is principally the advertisement of specific products targeted at specific segments of society. It could be an advertisement targeted at the student population, i.e. products like pens, biros, calculators, exercise books, etc. or an advertisement targeted at footballers who use products such as boots, jerseys, pants, etc. Other commonly advertised products include alcohol, tobacco, fast food, mobile phones, etc.

Public service advertising is a non-commercial advertisement used to inform, educate and motivate the public about non-commercial issues, public interest issues, and initiatives such as AIDS, political ideology, religious persuasion, anti-corruption crusades, etc. In its non-commercial form, advertising is a powerful educational tool capable of reaching and motivating large audiences.

Television commercials are generally considered the most effective mass-market advertising drive, and this is primarily because of the audio-visual combination of televisions in information dissemination. The exorbitant prices television networks charge for commercial airtime bears eloquent testimony to the high value of television advertisement. *Radio advertising* is quite potent in getting messages to target audiences, and it is relatively cheaper than television advertising. We have radios in cars, mobile phones, calculators, etc. Given this ubiquity, the radio has a wider reach than television and the internet, which are still considered elitist in some communities. *Internet advertising* is also gaining popularity and acceptance because there is an increasing shift towards consumers' usage of the Internet. Advertising on

the World Wide Web (WWW) is a modern phenomenon, and it is the newest media advertising approach. With the use of the internet, the world has become a global village, and the advertisement of goods and services on the net has a tremendous mass-market impact. Another recent advertising phenomenon is *e-mail advertising*, which is an advertisement delivered to your e-mail address. Unsolicited e-mail advertising is known as "spam" and is increasingly becoming popular. *Print media advertising* is principally newspaper and magazine advertisements of goods and services. It is elitist because it is targeted mainly at the literate members of the society. In the print medium, there are classified adverts, display adverts, public notices, etc. Other types of print medium advertising include handbills, printed flyers, posters, back-of-event tickets, supermarket receipts, etc. Ogbodah (1990, p.13) states: 'Print advertising has really taken a giant stride in Nigeria since the colonial era. Today, newspapers and magazines of all sizes and circulation are full of advertisements, ranging from non-productive obituaries to full pages of supplements. There has been phenomenal growth in the magazine sector of the Nigerian media.'

4. Functions of Advertising

Advertisers always determine what their goals are and what they want to achieve before embarking on advertising campaigns, and there are novel methods employed by advertisers to ensure customer patronage and loyalty. Advertising performs the following functions: It gives information about the product. On this, Durant and Lambrou (2009, p.93) state that advertising conveys information so that consumers know what is available, who makes it and where they can get it. This is basically awareness creation. The advertiser ensures that the clients have sufficient information about the product, such as the salient features, uniqueness and how to differentiate it from others. For example, 'if e no be Panadol, e no fit be like Panadol.' Advertising also persuades the clients to try the advertised product. The principal persuasive strategy used by advertisers is to draw attention to a product, carefully highlight its benefits to the consumers, and succinctly state its relative strengths over other products, for example, 'Gillette, nobody knows more about shaving' or 'Rothman's King size, the best tobacco money can buy.'

Advertising also educates the general public on the advantages of using the product or the losses that may be suffered by not using it. An instance of this is the radio commercial advert for "Yoyo Bitter", which states: 'E don clean all di dirty wey dey for my body Pata Pata.' The obvious advantage of drinking 'Yoyo Bitter' is that it cleanses and purifies the body system. However, the implied negative is that if you do not drink it, you stand the risk of having an unhealthy and contaminated body system. The advertisement also reminds the public and the clients that the product is effective and still in circulation; this is called a reminder advertisement. Many of the radio and television advertisements that we are bombarded with every day fall into this category. Popular examples in Nigeria's media are telecommunication advertisements such as 'MTN, Everywhere you go' and 'GLO with pride'. They are meant to increase customer loyalty by suggesting to them that it is the preferred product and not yet withdrawn from circulation. It performs entertaining functions with the sole aim of securing patronage by getting people to increase its use. The emergent trend in advertising in Nigeria is that advertisers entertain their loyal and potential customers through songs and short plays. In the adverts, the verbal play stylized acting, puns and rhythms are often memorable, enjoyable and amusing. Cook (1992) rightly observes: 'I have invariably found while teaching, that the words and details of advertisements come to students' minds more readily than those of novels, poems and plays and that they are often recalled with more laughter and enthusiasm.'

5. Linguistic Features in Advertising

In this section, the linguistic features used by advertisers are identified and relevant examples are drawn from Nigerian newspapers, magazines, radio and television advertisements of goods and services.

5.1. Synthetic Personalization

Synthetic personalization is the process of addressing mass audiences as though they were individuals through inclusive language usage (Fairclough, 2001). Conventional practice in advertising is that advertisers communicate their messages to the target audience as if they are talking to individuals. This is achieved through the use of the exophoric reference "you," which is directed at everybody or whoever is reading the particular advertisement. Examples are:

- You fit look kampe for the face but dey positive [AIDS advert]
- You are what you drink. Obey your thirst. [Beverage]

5.2. Referential Indirectness

An indirect reference is an implied or indirect reference to a person, event, or thing. It is a reference to something that is supposed to be known but not explicitly mentioned. It can be an indirect remark targeted at other competitors in the same industry that is not expressly stated but rather a veiled statement from which meanings can be imputed. The MTN catchphrase is appropriate here: 'MTN everywhere you go'. This may mean that MTN has a network everywhere you go, but some service providers do not have a network everywhere you go.

5.3. Caveat

This is in the form of advice or a subtle warning issued tactfully by the advertiser at the end of the advert. Potential buyers are warned by the statement to do their due diligence before purchase; the seller is not responsible for problems that the buyer encounters with the product after the sale. It is, however, presented carefully so that it does not detract from the persuasiveness of the advert item; for example,

- 'Dispirin, fast solution for everyday ache and pain.....
If after two days the symptoms persist, consult your doctor.'

- 'Rothman Kingsize, the best tobacco money can buy.....
The Federal Ministry of Health warns that smokers are liable to die young.'

5.4. Short and Simple Words

The language of advertisements is short, simple and easy to comprehend. There are no deep metaphors, technical jargon or ambiguous expressions that may confuse the target audience. Advert messages are organized into structures that are precise and straight to the point.

- "Union Bank, big, strong, reliable."
- "Peak, milk at its peak."
- "Have a Coke and a smile."

5.5. Use of Exclamatives

This is a very loud rendition of the advertised product or service, done primarily to seize the attention of the viewing or listening audience. At the beginning of the advertisement, the advertiser usually deploys a very sharp and sudden outburst that is short and direct. In the examples below, there are no wordy preliminaries, and in less than ten words, the audience is plunged into the middle of an arresting advertisement.

- Beta wakis don land o! [Goldenvita]
- What a delicious experience! [Mr Biggs]
- I don port o! [MTN]

5.6. Use of Nigerian Pidgin

An emergent trend in the use of language in Nigeria's media advertisements is the felicitous use of Nigerian pidgin. Advertising practitioners find its use appropriate in a linguistically heterogeneous speech community like Nigeria simply because it is an ethnically neutral language which can be twisted and shaped for spontaneous self-expression. Besides, advertisements in pidgin are non-elitist and usually humorous.

- "Dis MTN wahala no go kill man o,
Man just dey waka dey paint yellow
Like person wey dem swear for."
- "Vitafoam dear o but e good for bodi"
- "Mama do good don come o, she give us Indomine;
Indomine sweet well well..."

5.7. Distinctive Orthography

This manifests in the form of coinages and deliberate spelling mistakes or graphological deviations.

In some advertisements, the copywriter misspells some words on purpose or adds some suffix or prefix to some common words. New words are created to attract the attention of potential customers and meet their needs for curiosity and novelty. Such newly coined words and phrases may suggest that the product or service being advertised possesses peculiar qualities as well as the value of novelty. For example:

- "We know *eggsactly* how to sell eggs"
- "Your typjng while you drive is asbad as your drivinh whilr yoou typr"

In the first example, the advertisement is on the sale of eggs; "*eggsactly*" not only has nearly similar pronunciation as "exactly" but it has connections with the last word "eggs" in this sentence. The second example is a road safety campaign, which accentuates the danger of lack of concentration while driving. The misspellings may shock us visually but they are deliberately done to seize our attention until we understand the message that is being conveyed.

5.8. Use of Compounds

In advertisements, compound words are frequently used to achieve the desired effect. Some compounds are written as single words, and some have hyphens, but others appear as two separate words. Lexical restraints on compounds are few; therefore, advertisers are relatively free to create compound words which are appropriate to the copy text. Compound words sometimes best express the thought that the advertiser wants to pass across to the audience. For example: "*Chocolate-flavored cereal*," "*fresh-tasting milk*," "*top-quality bulbs*."

5.9. Use of Literary/ Figurative Language

Another noticeable linguistic characteristic in adverts is the preponderance use of figurative language. Figures of speech such as alliteration, repetition, pun, simile, metaphor, etc., are used for a variety of purposes: to reinforce meaning, to aid comprehension and recall of an advert item, for the sake of emphasizing the salient features of a product, to explain the advert item by drawing a comparison between two concepts and sometimes to unfairly persuade the prospective client.

- Maltina cares for you/cares in a special way [personification]
- Guinness brings out the action in you [personification]
- Kia - The car that cares [alliteration]
- Vitafoam, for foam at its finest - [alliteration]
- BIC.....Your write choice. [pun]

- Equitorial Trust Bank... you can bank on us. [pun]

5.10. Code-mixing

Code-mixing refers to the mixing of lexical items or grammatical structures from different languages within a sentence or conversation (Myers-Scotton, 1993). It is a bilingual habit that is primarily used to enhance communication. Code-mixing is intra-sentential because the code-mixed word is found within the sentence boundary, and it does not breach the structural integrity of the participating languages. The code-mixed words can appear initially, medially or finally in a sentence. The examples below have the words used in initial position.

- Kini soo, now Ibadan can glo with pride [Globacom]
- Eko akete, now Lagos can glo with pride [Globacom]
- Kabiyesi oo, Comfort on wheel [Jinchang Motorcycle]

6. Conclusion

The language of print and electronic advertisements is highly emotive, and it is created from the inner desire to affect and influence consumers' attitudes and behaviour. The combination of words in an advert is deliberately used to convey the right message to the right people at the right time. Without a doubt, language is the most important and most comprehensive way to convey meaning. However, advertisers also use other non-linguistic elements such as colours, music, visual aids and pictures to influence meaning. The advertisers are obviously aware of the value system and psychology of the average Nigerian potential consumer, and they use appropriate language to persuade them to patronize specific products and services.

In Nigeria, the advertising industry is large and growing and advertising itself has transformed in character into a modern, more scientific approach in which creativity is the watchword. Messages that make advertisements more tempting to consumers' eyes should be produced by emphasizing contextually relevant, unobtrusive advertisements intended to help rather than inundate consumers.

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